

NWORLDS APART

Richard Cowper

George Cringe is a middle-aged school-teacher, married with several children. His marriage, while not a failure, is hardly a great success, and he is somewhat drawn towards a fellow teacher, Jennifer Lawton, who is much younger than he is. For relaxation, George has taken to creating an endless SF saga set on the planet Agenor, where his hero and heroine, Zil Bryn and Orgypp, face various problems, their current one involving an outbreak of psychedelic mushrooms.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the galaxy, on the planet Chnas, live Zil Bryn and his wife Orgypp. Bryn is currently composing a long weird narrative called *Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage*, set on a strange world called Urth . . .

With this new novel Richard Cowper confirms his status as one of the most entertaining and readable SF writers working at the present time.

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WORLDS APART

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

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PHOENIX

DOMINO

KULDESAK

CLONE

TIME OUT OF MIND

THE TWILIGHT OF BRIAREUS

WORLDS APART

a science-fiction novel

by

RICHARD COWPER

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While engaged upon the preparation of Mr. Cringe's story for the purposes of publication I felt constrained to draw his attention to his use of the word 'grok'. I pointed out to him that Robert Heinlein had already employed a concept named 'grok' in his remarkable work *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Mr. Cringe, who has long been one of Mr. Heinlein's most enthusiastic admirers, was both astonished and intrigued by this coincidence. He assured me that he had not yet had the pleasure of reading Mr. Heinlein's book and could only suppose that his own choice of 'grok' was but further evidence of the existence of asomatic overlap and the prevalent contiguity of Chnas for which his own history would appear to offer remarkable evidence. Nevertheless, in the circumstances, I feel myself in honour bound to tender my own sincere apologies to Mr. Heinlein for Mr. Cringe's inadvertent appropriation of that term of which Mr. Heinlein was indisputably the original 'onlie begetter'.

R.C.

'All Things Exist in the Human Imagination'

WILLIAM BLAKE

ALTHOUGH OUR OWN history books have yet to record the fact it will be helpful to note right at the beginning that October 12th, 1978, as well as being the seventeenth day of the Power Workers' strike, the eighth day of the Mineworkers' strike and the third day of the Rail Workers' strike, was also the first day of George Cringe's very own personal strike against the intolerable indignity of being George Cringe, parent, breadwinner, and Junior Science teacher at Bagshot Road Comprehensive School.

The precise moment when George's prolonged negotiations with himself finally broke down is not easy to pinpoint since, on his own admission, he had been carrying out a private work-to-rule campaign ever since Patrick ('Creeper') Maggerty had been promoted over his head some eighteen months earlier, but it cannot be denied that something very closely akin to a wave of revelation broke in foaming spume over the Cringe consciousness at 4.15 p.m. on that Friday afternoon when he elbowed the front door of No. 27 Laburnum Crescent shut behind him and discovered this scrawled message tucked into the frame of the hall-stand mirror—

*'Gone bingo with Gran. Give kids tea. Fish fings in fridge.
Marge.'*

Perhaps it was that 'fish fings' which did it. Someone or something deep inside George gave a wild, silent scream of anguish. The pile of exercise books he was carrying spilled in a clattering cascade to the hall floor. He snatched the note down, crumpled it savagely into a tiny ball and hurled it at

the stained glass panel of the front door. 'God in Heaven!' he wailed. 'Angels of Mercy! *Let me OUT!!*'

The galaxy known to its inhabitants as 'Chnas' has two numbers in the National Geographic Star Catalogue. The reason for this is that Chnas I *is* Chnas II, only viewed from the other side. Since, linearly speaking, Chnas lies at the absolute limits of terrestrial telescopic observation, the minute speck of gaseous fuzz that has been photographed somewhere in the region of our northern heavens occupied by the constellation *Sicyon minor* has not yet been identified with that other miniscule speck of gaseous fuzz that appears in the diametrically opposite side of our heavens low down in the antipodean constellation *Psylla major*. No doubt some computer will get around to matching them up one of these days and will earn itself an overhaul in the process.

Chnassian astronomers are, of course, faced with a similar situation *vis-à-vis* our own galaxy, but their mental conditioning being somewhat different from our own they appear to find no great difficulty in accepting the notion that the cosmos and everything within it is one vast sensorial illusion. Thus a Chnassian astro-physicist having counted the number of Cepheid variables in a particular nebula would automatically assume that his result was 'wrong' simply because his eyes told him it was 'right'. Similarly nothing is easier for the Chnassian to accept than concepts like 'negative mass', 'reversed time' or 'black holes in the universe'—incidentally, their own term for these latter phenomena is 'oscitations'. One famous Chnassian museum contains a large room in which a working model of the entire cosmos is said to exist. No one has ever *seen* it, but countless thousands of Chnasians have *heard* it. It consists of a quiet chuckle endlessly repeated in total darkness. Its texture, though admittedly indescribable, is rumoured to resemble that of a Gruyère cheese.

'Chnas' is also the name of a delightful planet which re-

volves about a 4th magnitude star in one of the spiral arms of its galaxy. The entire galaxy is also known as Chnas for the very simple reason that the Chnassians, having observed it, realize that in all probability it has only subjective validity. Hence they choose to regard it as an extension of Chnas itself. The same could be said for the rest of their observable cosmos. It is all Chnas. Come to think of it, to a Chnassian, our own galaxy too is Chnas. Both of it. The concept has a certain breathtaking simplicity that is not unattractive.

The only person on Earth who had stumbled upon the possibility of Chnas did not know that he had done so and certainly would not have believed it if anyone had told him. Nevertheless, when, in the second week of July 1978, George Cringe, having extracted three exercise books from the school stationery store, locked the door of his tiny study behind him, opened the first of the notebooks and penned the unlikely words: *'Zil laced thrunnings with Orgypp and grokked her tenderly in the Agenorian twilight'*, he tripped inadvertently into one of those metaphysical holes in the invisible Gruyère and caused a rictus of truly cosmic significance.

George's spiritual bolt-hole was a planet which he had chosen to call 'Agenor'. This world was his to do as he liked with—or so he believed. At the weekends, on the pretext of preparing lessons or marking schoolwork, it was his custom to retire to Agenor and become Zil Bryn, an inoffensive Agenorian pedagogue who nevertheless possessed mysterious though unspecified powers. Right now George was about to confront his hero with an unknown species of psychedelic toadstool which had appeared mysteriously in the littoral regions of Knyff and would soon be causing considerable perturbation in the metropolis.

Contemplation of the possible effects of this fungus had occupied George throughout his car ride from Bagshot Road and he had been savouring one or two particularly delectable

descriptive phrases as he walked up the pathway to his front door. His cry of anguish on discovering Margery's note could thus be interpreted either as the frustration of the creative artist or as the wail of the baby who has been promised and then denied its lawful stint at the breast.

Orgypp leant over Zil's shoulder and read the words he had just transcribed. 'Who is this Shennifer?' she demanded.*

Zil scratched his nose thoughtfully. 'An Urthling,' he said. 'She has *hwyllth*?'

'Of course.'

'Will Shorge *grok* with her?'

'You think he should?'

'Everyone should *grok*. Especially your Urthlings.'

'But Urth isn't Chnas, Orgypp.'

'Everything is Chnas,' she retorted.

'Everything except Urth,' he insisted gently.

'That's impossible.'

'Are you writing this story or am I?'

'We both are. Shall I help you with the *grokking* bit between Shorge and Shennifer?'

'I haven't got there yet.'

'Well, hurry up.'

'You can't rush these things, Orgypp.'

'Anyway I came up to tell you that supper's ready.'

'Very well. I'll be down in a moment. What have you got for me?'

'Mushrooms.'

'Mushrooms? Where did you get them?'

'Llylly gave them to me. She brought some back from Knyff. She says they're out of this Chnas.'

George unbuttoned his burberry and at the second attempt

* Author's note: I am indebted to Mr. G. H. Cringe for my translations from the Chnassian vernacular. Concepts which are self-explanatory or for which no satisfactory English equivalent could be found have been left in the original form.

succeeded in getting it to lodge on top of the pile of other garments that cluttered the peg on the stand. Then he stooped and began to collect the spilled exercise books. A folded sheet of notepaper had fallen from one of them. He opened it out and found inside a crude but vigorous sketch executed in green ball-point of a naked man and woman linked together by a rigid male sexual organ of truly Homeric dimensions. A balloon was issuing from the woman's mouth. Inside the balloon were the words: '*Your grate man*' and six exclamation marks.

George contemplated this edifying work for several seconds and wondered who the anonymous artist was. He suspected Sybil Bosset, a physically precocious but otherwise unremarkable thirteen year old. If he was right then her art was certainly streets ahead of her physics. He refolded the paper and noticed some lettering on the back. '*G.H.C. + J.V.L. pass along.*'

He opened the sheet again and regarded the features of the male figure more closely. That vivid grass-green scribble of moustache was indisputable. Strange that it hadn't registered the first time. As he gazed at it the realization dawned on him that his reaction to the discovery was falling far short of what it should have been. Instead of anger and disgust he felt only a vague sense of shy pride that his young pupils could still visualize him in this most human of all human situations, limb-locked with a student teacher sixteen years his junior. It seemed to compensate in some undefined way for his disappointment in being temporarily denied the delights of Agenor.

He slipped the cartoon into his inside pocket, finished stacking the scattered books and lifted them on to the ledge of the hall stand. Then he rose to his feet and eyed his image in the mirror, trying to see himself as Jennifer Lawlor must see him. The effort cost him what amounted to a severe mental squint.

* * *

Thirty-four years earlier Albert Cringe, railway signalman by profession, had stood cap in hand before a hare-lipped clerk in the Brighton Registrar's office and announced that henceforth his infant son would confront a warring world as 'George Herbert Cringe'. Albert had chosen the Christian names in honour of H. G. Wells, the only writer whose works had ever impressed him. Even so they had not apparently impressed him sufficiently for him to get the names in the right order.

By a curious genetic fluke George had grown up to bear a remarkable facial resemblance to his illustrious namesake. His eyes were blue and bright, his hair sandy, his face rather round and chubby. Welfare milk and orange juice would ensure that he eventually achieved his full physical potential and at eighteen years of age would stand at 5'8" while weighing just over 10 stone. Intellectually he was doomed to be classed as 'average' though there was some reason to believe that this assessment failed to do him justice. He succeeded in scraping through his '11 plus' examination and entered the local grammar school where for five years he would occupy a place about two-thirds of the way down the form list. Now and again, when his interest was fully engaged, he was capable of surprising his teachers. This did not happen often enough for any of them to single him out as being anything except a middle-of-the-roader.

In his thirteenth year George discovered science fiction. It arrived in the form of a magazine called, apparently, '*ASTO—*' (half the cover had been ripped off) which he extracted from behind a radiator in the school changing-room. Idly thumbing through it he found himself engrossed in a story in which a tiny meteorite had plunged to earth and been found to have an impossible physical density. Eventually it was dug up—there was a startling black and white illustration of an enormous crane hauling it up out of the ground—and it proved to be some sort of alien life form. George galloped through this story with his disbelief so firmly

suspended that his toes barely touched the ground. For the first time in his life some of the so-called 'facts' of his science classes had been made imaginatively real for him.

Over the next year and a half his literary diet consisted almost entirely of s.f. He discovered two other addicts in his own form and the three of them used to swop magazines and paperbacks while indulging in learned pseudo-scientific discussions about 'Psi' and 'Space/Time' during break. Their conversation became increasingly peppered with erudite references to Čapek, Heinlein, Van Vogt, Asimov, Aldiss and Wyndham. And then—George never quite knew how or why—the honeymoon was over. There was no divorce, just a gradual tapering off. He became absorbed in aero-modelling; in fishing; and in girls. In that order. By the time he eventually left the sixth form after two years' study of Maths, Physics and Chemistry, he would have been hard pressed to tell you what it was that had decided him to opt for Sciences rather than Arts.

And yet ... and yet.... Ever since the door of wonder had been opened for him in that damp and smelly changing-room it had never been truly closed. Some secret part of George Cringe would remain for ever haunted by memories of those enchanting vistas in which his youthful fancy had gambolled while his bored teachers droned dully on through interminable afternoons. Without recognizing it as such he had stumbled upon the holy honeydew of the imagination, and when an embittered and sarcastic English master pounced on a copy of *Amazing Stories* which George was reading beneath the desk and poured scorn and public ridicule upon it and upon him, George had been goaded into self-defence. Although he could not have known it, his sullen retort: 'Well, what's *wrong* with escapism, sir?' had called into question all the dubious values upon which the English secondary education system is based.

Nevertheless it was within that same system that George was eventually to find his own humble niche. A succession

of girls having come between himself and the examination results which might have ensured him a place at a university, he entered the local Teachers' Training College where he found yet more girls and even two or three who seemed prepared to consider him as a permanent partner. In fact this appeared to be the very price they had chosen to put upon those physical intimacies George hungered for.

By the end of his second year the field had narrowed down to two—Violet Roper and Margery Phillips. Vi was training to teach Biology, and Marge was studying P.E. Vi was refreshingly forthright in her talk about sex but had a braying laugh which occasionally set George's teeth on edge. She also smelt a bit strong in hot weather. Marge was better looking but not so bright. Quite often George was pretty damned sure he didn't want to marry either of them. But he did want to sleep with them. Well, not sleep exactly. In fact he frequently toyed with the idea of somehow getting both of them into bed with him at the same time.

In the end Marge won. She allowed him to fill her up with gin punch at the Second Year Summer Term Ball and to steer her off into the shrubbery behind the tennis courts. As a consummation it left almost everything devoutly to be wished. No sooner had he got her down on the grass than she developed a severe attack of hiccups. The effect this had on George was profoundly disconcerting. He found that his mind had become incapable of concentrating on the task in hand because he was always anticipating the next explosive 'hic!' Marge's syncopated apologies did nothing to restore his composure. Finally he coaxed her up into a sitting position and told her to put her head between her knees. She doubled up tipsily; her long fair hair fell forward exposing her ears and the back of her neck; and George, seeing her thus for the first time in his life, foolishly fell in love with her.

They were married a week after their final examinations, and within a year George realized that he was not really in love with Margery at all but with the back of her neck.

But by then it was too late. Margery was six months pregnant and they had taken out a twenty-five-year mortgage on the house in Laburnum Crescent. George's world was closing in before it had ever opened out.

Ceremony is the essence of day to day life on Chnas. It induces sensations of well-being and security in the midst of cosmic chaos. There is a prescribed ritual for almost every conceivable occasion. All rituals are harmonious and beautiful. Beauty is worshipped on Chnas as passionately as money is worshipped on Earth. It is the fountainhead of *hwyllth*. Indeed, according to a revered Chnassian sage: "*Beauty is Hwyllth: Hwyllth Beauty*", *That is all ye know on Chnas and all ye need to know.*'

Scattered at random throughout Chnas are the Sky-Mirrors. These are round, shallow, saucer-like ponds and lakes, criss-crossed by stepping-stone paths. At any time of the day or night Chnassians may be observed wandering gently to and fro across these paths, pausing every now and again to contemplate the reflection of the clouds or the stars or the three Chnassian moons. To be called a 'sky-mirror' is the highest compliment one Chnassian can pay to another. It implies profound depths of spiritual tranquillity that are as desirable as they are rare.

Every household on Chnas possesses its own small sky-mirror. Without exception these occupy the centre of the inner courtyard of each dwelling. They are the spiritual focus of the household. Those who feel the need to refresh themselves by purging off the cloying film of reason, repair to their inner courtyard and set their minds afloat while playing softly on a water flute or fingering the strings of a small *drth*-wood zither known as a *ghlune*.

It was to their sky-mirror that Zil and Orgypp retreated after dinner. Oeneone, the largest of the three Chnassian moons was at the full and her silvery light now bathed the inner courtyard in a cool, mysterious glow. Zil stretched him-

self out on the silken cushions, propped his head on his bent arm and gazed down into the mirror. Orgypp picked up her *ghlune*. She dipped the tip of her right index finger into the water and then drew it slowly along one of the strings. A series of tiny, shivering ripples began to chase one another across the surface of the mirror, rocking the twinkling images of the stars, while a barely audible humming invaded the still, warm air. Zil sighed. Orgypp's finger fluttered to another string. The surface of the mirror pimpled up into a multitude of tiny spikes. Zil raised his head. 'What is it?' he murmured.

'I don't know,' she confessed. 'My harmonies are all wrong. I feel . . . uneasy.'

'You wish to *grok*?'

'I—I don't know. You feel nothing?'

Zil was silent for a long moment. 'I feel your unease.'

'Tell me,' she said.

'It is an inwards turning,' he replied slowly. 'A closing up. An against thing. I have never felt anything like it before.'

Orgypp laid aside the *ghlune*. She unfastened the sash that held her robe and let it slide from her shoulders. Then she raised her slender arms and drew out the two jewelled combs that pinned her dark hair. Released it tumbled in a whispering cascade over her bare breast and back. Slowly she knelt and regarded her naked image in the sky-mirror. Zil watched and wondered and felt as if a hand were squeezing his heart.

Slowly Orgypp stretched out her arms across the mirror. A solitary tear-diamond trickled down her cheek and plopped off her chin into the water. It fell on to that minute segment of the reflected heavens that held the invisible scrap of star-dust which was our own Milky Way. As it did so, untouched by either of them, the strings of the discarded *ghlune* began to vibrate; the surface of the pool quivered until the mirrored heavens and even the silvery reflection of the kneeling Orgypp were swirled into an incoherent concavity of trembling light.

It lasted for perhaps a minute during which the courtyard

was awash with scurrying echoes of the ghostly *ghlune*. As they faded into stillness both Zil and Orgypp heard, clear and faint as a dune-piper's call, a voice calling out of nowhere, out of the darkness behind the stars: '*God in Heaven! Angels of Mercy! Let me out!*'

The true natures of Space and Time have been the playthings of terrestrial philosophers since long before the Greeks invented the concept of logic and began sticking labels on to everything. Before that men had to make do with the things themselves. After Plato and Aristotle and their innumerable progeny there were the *ideas* of things as well. This, as any Chnassian knows, is but to compound confusion and leads inevitably to Materialism, Causality, and the demand for a Fixed Order of Natural Laws which is but Mental Myopoeia writ large.

The Chnassians recognize only Unnatural Laws, maintaining with some justification that a 'Natural Law' is, *ipso facto*, a contradiction in terms. They would be amazed if anyone were to suggest to them that nothing could ever exceed the speed of light. The speed of Chnassian thought, they would rightly insist, makes the speed of light look like a lame *snyll*. There is, however, a Chnassian equivalent to terrestrial Physics. They call it *gryllook*. It might perhaps be translated as 'Dimensionology'. It is taught only in the Chnassian nursery schools. By the time a junior Chnassian has learnt how to read and write he has already mastered all the basic techniques of de-substantiation, physical translation, and '*hwoming*'. The rest of his life will be largely devoted to exploring the infinite subtleties of the *grok*.

Aeons ago, shortly after they had stumbled on the secrets of *gryllook*, the Chnassians explored their own galaxy. It took them about a terrestrial lunar month to do it and gave rise to the familiar expression among them: '*There's no place like hwom.*' Nowadays such travel tends to be confined to the nursery school stage and parties of young Chnassians

are conducted round the various more enlightening corners of their galaxy by their teachers. Zil, incidentally, was one of these.

Tripping round the galaxy and *hwoming* on Chnas is one thing; inter-galactic tripping is something else again. It is strongly discouraged but not actively forbidden (practically nothing *is* actively forbidden on Chnas). The reason behind the discouragement is that once in the far distant past several adventurous young Chnassians did alight out for the more remote nebulae only to *hwom* back into the Chnassian future, thus proving conclusively that the techniques of *gryllook* are applicable only within certain clearly defined limits. The fact that they had returned at all was only discovered long afterwards when a series of strange little poems suddenly appeared chipped on a lonely rock face in the desert of Frg. By then, of course, the author had long since moved on.

Today these verses are known throughout Chnas as *The Testament of Mgn Rkhs*. One of the most poignant of them has been given the title '*Nohwom*'. It reads as follows :

‘I..
Mgn Rkhs...
flg..
..fl
o
dg
gd
o
llf!
!llfng
oho
..Mgn Rkhs
..I
ho!
!oho
!o!
18

Intoned to a *pizzicato ghlune* accompaniment composed by Sgnff Erll, 'Nohwom' has long been treasured as a classic Chnassian *grokking hwl*.

George lifted his chin and treated his image to a species of enigmatic hooded glance with which he had once seen Paul Newman favour Catherine Ross in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Its effect on George was to make him look as if he were about to be sick. He pensively fingered his moustache and decided, there and then, that he would grow it longer. He turned his head to the left and eyed himself over his right shoulder. The new angle brought into view part of the back of his collar and he observed that it was speckled with dandruff. His lip twitched. 'You crud,' he muttered at his reflection. 'You pathetic, second-rate crud.'

Whereupon his right eyelid drooped in a covert wink, and the corner of his lip quirked into a grin. His eyelid lifted to disclose a blue eye that still twinkled. 'Sod it all!' he murmured. 'Sod the bleeding lot of them!'

The metal catch on the garden gate clinked and he heard the oh so familiar whine of childish voices. His two youngest twin offspring were home from school. The light in George's eye dimmed as though the voltage had been cut. He took a furtive hesitant step towards the stairs and the sanctuary of his study only to find himself tethered by those phantom fish fingers. The door bell shrilled and the letter-box clattered imperiously. 'Cut that out!' yelled George.

'Hi, Dad! Where's Mum? I got four house stars, Dad! Liar! You're a liar! I did, Dad! Well done, Katie.... *Bleah!*... What's for tea? Did my comic come? Fish fingers. Oh, not *again!* For God's sake hang that satchel up somewhere, Mike! But, Dad, we had fish fingers last.... "Up" I said.... It's time for *Crackersnap*.... Bags I switch on.... Bags I! ... *Crash!* ... *Squeal!* ... STOP IT YOU TWO!!'

A book was lying open on the kitchen dresser. One of Marilyn's presumably. While he waited for the hot plate to

warm up George eyed the text dispiritedly. Generations of students had scrawled their underlinings and pencilled 'LEARN THIS' in the margin. *'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge?'* Someone had even scribbled in 'tut tut' above the word 'prick'. Who were these words addressed to? he wondered. Not to him, certainly. Who could he revenge himself upon? At that moment he almost doubted whether he could bleed!

The electric ring began to glow dully. George dropped a chunk of margarine into the frying pan and watched it begin to melt and bubble. Then he ripped open the cardboard carton of 'Coddyskins Coated in Scrumptious Crispy Golden Crumbs'. They were completely cubic and resembled no natural food that it was possible to imagine. As he decanted them into the smoking fat and chivvied them round with a spoon George found himself trying to visualize them in their natural habitat. Thousands upon thousands of pale little crumbly cubes flickering in and out among the rainbow grottoes, the towers and fronded turrets of mysterious coral reefs; the whole shoal darting as one cube now here, now there, in their mad flight to escape even larger cubic predators. Meanwhile the crafty native fishermen would have to trap them in nets with round holes because they would swim straight through the square ones. Yes, that was it! Natural selection! Untold generations of square nets had gone to produce these curious little creatures, each successive spawning driving them nearer and nearer to the perfect cube, until one day—Ecce Coddyskin!—Nature's answer to the square-holed net! The concept delighted him. 'Come and get it!' he yelled against the gales of canned mirth which were beating in from the television set in the lounge.

'Can't you bring it in here, Dad? We're watching *Cracker-snap*.'

George had the answer to that one. Reaching up to the fuse box above the stove he tripped the main switch. There

was a wail of anguish from the lounge. 'Dad, the telly's gone off!'

'Must be another power cut,' he called sympathetically. 'Go and wash your filthy hands.'

The strings of the wayward *ghlune* were still trembling inaudibly as Orgypp lowered her outstretched arms and hugged them across her breast. 'What does it mean?' she whispered fearfully. 'Who is God?'

'It is the Urthlings' *oho*,' said Zil. 'I invented it.'

Orgypp slowly raised her head. 'I don't understand. . . .'

'Nor I,' he admitted. 'Yet the voice. . . .'

'Yes?'

'Shorge's.' He touched his forehead with his fingertips. 'I have heard it so often in my head, Orgypp. I could not be mistaken.'

There was silence in the courtyard. Ooneone's silver disc rose higher in the Chnassian heavens. Her beams crept cat-like among the cloisters and stalked timid shadows across the patterned tesserae. Orgypp shivered.

Zil stretched out his arm across the mirror and touched her gently on the shoulder. 'Come,' he said. 'Robe yourself. We will consult Sng Rmh.'

The power 'came on' again soon after tea, in time for Mike and Katie to catch the two hundred and forty-first episode of *Space Patrol*. George stacked the dirty dishes in the sink, collected the pile of exercise books from the hall stand and plodded upstairs. As he set foot on the landing he heard from below a trans-Atlantic accent cry out: '*The starb'd warp-drive's blown, Cap'n!*' 'For Christ's sake shut that door, Mike!' he yelled. 'And turn the volume down!'

'Sorry, Dad.'

A door thudded.

George sighed and let himself into the tiny cubby-hole of a room that served as his study. As the latch clicked behind

him and he inhaled the familiar stuffy atmosphere he felt something roughly akin to peace descending upon him. He dumped the stack of exercise books on the desk, took two paces across to the window and stared out. Through the piled cauliflower clouds to the north-east a jumbo jet was descending like a pregnant shark upon Gatwick airport. He watched it pass out of sight. In one of the gardens belonging to the row of identical houses which ran parallel to Laburnum Crescent a red-haired woman was unpegging washing from a revolving clothesline. Two plots further along an old man was systematically dismantling a row of plastic cloches. George surveyed them both moodily and realized he didn't even know their names. Mrs. Blank and old Mr. Anon. Were they happy? Dying painfully of cancer? Lost in a fog? Did they really *exist* at all? 'Christ, Cringe,' he muttered. 'What you need is a drink.'

He hurried back downstairs to the lounge, marched over to the sideboard where they kept their slender stock of alcohol and poured himself a substantial whisky.

'Ooh, Daddy! What will Mummy say?' Twelve-year-old Katie was making goggle eyes of disapproval at him.

George screwed the top down on to the bottle and thrust it back into the cupboard. 'And how's Captain Crap making out, kiddies?' he enquired genially.

'Gurk,' corrected Katie. 'Captain Gurk.'

'Ah, yes.' George nodded. 'Captain Gurk to be sure. The only space scout with atomic piles. Here's to him.' He lifted the tumbler to his lips and took a swig. 'Long may he continue to ride the celestial ranges.'

'Oh, shut up, Dad. I can't hear what he's saying.'

'A thousand apologies, son. Your inebriate parent is on his way.'

Back in his study George placed the tumbler on the centre of his desk and sat down in the chair before it. 'Come on, Cringe,' he exhorted himself. 'Snap out of it.' He took another gulp at his whisky and opened the top exercise book on the

pile. 'Astromy,' he read, 'is the science of heavenly bodys.' This was Jennifer Lawlor's project with 2B. Come to think of it, wasn't he supposed to be finding her plasticene, lenses, and as many cardboard tubes as he could lay his hands on? Good luck to you, Jenny. He remembered that drawing, dipped his hand into his inside pocket and took out the folded paper. 'G.H.C. + J.V.L.' He opened it out and surveyed it once again, wondering parenthetically as he did so, why he had never been unfaithful to his wife. Was it simply lack of opportunity? Or lack of libido? Or what? The fact was he just couldn't visualize himself in the role. Yet it would be stretching truth to breaking point to see Margery as the resident nympho of Laburnum Crescent. One canter a fortnight if he was lucky. With her it was like handing out dog biscuits. Be a good boy, Fido, and we'll see about it. No, not tonight, George, I'm too tired. How tired is too tired? You're always too tired. Well, so would you be if you had the kids and Gran to look after and the house to keep clean and the shopping and the washing and ... and ... 'Jesus Christ,' murmured George, raising his head and staring dismally towards the window, 'I don't think she's ever *wanted* to do it in her whole bloody life.'

Counsellor Sng Rmh dwelt in the municipal Sanctuary in Vohl Park, his material needs attended to by a series of female acolytes to whom he gave instruction in ceremonial deportment and mastery of the *ghlune*. He also bred *prrs*. He was one hundred and four Chnassian years old, which made him about three hundred and fifty by terrestrial computation, and he was one of the younger Chnassian Counsellors.

When Zil and Orgypp were ushered on tip-toe into his presence they found the Counsellor reclining among cushions upon a carved *rnk*-wood settle. Two starry tapers twinkled in silver sconces flapped fantastic shadow banners across the arrased walls. Sng Rmh was wearing a voluminous indigo sky-robe on which the thirty-two signs of the Chnassian

Zodiac had been exquisitely embroidered in gold and silver thread. On his head was perched the tall, conical counselling cap. His long, snow-white hair overspread his shoulders like a shawl of mist and mingled inextricably with the spindrift of his silvery whiskers. On his lap rested an antique *ghlune*. Across its strings his long jewelled fingers flickered like cool flames.

Zil and Orgypp went carefully through the elaborate ritual prescribed for a consultation and then knelt on the cushions which a silent neophyte had placed in readiness before them. A large, ebony black *prrr* which had been curled asleep at its master's feet now uncurled itself, stretched luxuriously, flowed itself down from the bench and padded softly towards them. The old man's fingertips sprinkled a benison of pellucid drops from the *ghlune* and his huge shadow nodded as though in affirmation across the tapestried wall.

'Greetings in the name of *oho*, my children.' The voice was dry sand whispering in the Desert of Frg; was surf crumbling on the distant shores of Knyff; was a wayward breeze wafting through the perfumed forests of Nr.

Zil and Orgypp leant and touched their foreheads to the polished floor. The *prrr* sniffed at each of them in turn then slipped between them and disappeared into the shadows.

'Greetings, Counsellor,' they murmured in unison. 'We come to lap at the waterhole of wisdom.'

The ancient head cocked sideways and from beneath an eyebrow like a tatter of spring cloud a bright blue eye twinkled shrewdly. 'Zil Bryn?'

'He, Counsellor.'

'So? And little Orgypp too? What brings you here, *thoth* blossom?'

Orgypp and Zil raised themselves and glanced at one another. Before they could tell him Sng Rmh murmured: 'One moment.' He closed his eyes, seemed to listen to the silence, then nodded. His fingers strayed along his *ghlune* and the

quiet air was set sighing with the forlorn and beautiful melody of 'Nohwom'.

Orgypp and Zil had heard it many times before but never so exquisitely rendered. As the last notes trickled away Orgypp found her eyes aswim with tears. 'You unlock for us the treasury of *hwyllth*,' she whispered. 'My heart breaks.'

'You brought "*Nohwom*" with you, little Orgypp. I merely borrowed it and gave it back to you. What makes you so sad?'

Hesitantly, stumbling, running back and forth to pick up fragments she had dropped, Orgypp told the old man what had brought them to the Sanctuary.

Sng Rmh listened, quiet as a stone, darting from one face to the other with his quick, bird-bright glance. When Orgypp had finished he lifted his hand from the *ghlune*, crooked his little finger and abstractedly quarried a crumb of wax from his right ear. 'These mushrooms,' he said. 'You say they were gathered in Knyff?'

'Yes, Counsellor.'

'Describe them to me.'

'They are yellow with bright blue spots,' said Orgypp. 'The largest was about the size of the palm of my hand,' and she held up a hand for Sng Rmh's benefit.

The old man nodded. 'And the voice? You both heard it?'

'Yes, Counsellor.'

'And you maintain you recognized it?'

'I did,' said Zil. 'I'm certain of it. It was Shorge Gringe's voice. But Shorge does not exist.'

'In *oho* everything exists,' replied Sng Rmh calmly.

Zil bowed his head submissively.

'We do well not to forget it,' continued the old man. 'There is a legend that once, long ago, when Chnas was young, there arose among us those who maintained that our own five primary senses were the measure of all things. According to their doctrine any aspect of *oho* that could not be seen, heard, touched, smelt or tasted did not exist. They called themselves *Rllists* and for many years they and their teach-

ings were worshipped as though they were *oho*. And when, so the story goes, *oho* in his infinite humour elected to reveal to us the secrets of *gryllook*, these misguided bigots refused to acknowledge the gift, maintaining that *gryllook* was physically impossible and therefore could not exist.'

'What happened to them, Counsellor?' asked Orgypp.

'Their history is shrouded in obscurity, Orgypp, but the legend has it that they retired into the wilderness of Frg and there set about constructing an extraordinary vessel which they called a "spacebote". In form it is reputed to have resembled an enormous rampant *thrunng*—not perhaps wholly inappropriate since the *Rllists* had frequently been heard to refer to themselves as "the seed of *oho*". When this vessel was complete—and the construction occupied them for many generations—they and their followers all climbed aboard, shook the dust of Frg from their shoes and departed thunderously skywards. The last words of their leader were: "So long suckers."'

'What does that mean?' enquired Orgypp.

'You may well ask,' said Sng Rmh. 'It was generally assumed to be a good luck invocation of some sort, but no one could be certain.'

'Then what became of them, Counsellor?' asked Zil.

'For a number of years they made uneventful though extremely slow progress in the general direction of the Great *Prr*. By then our ancestors had completely mastered the techniques of *gryllook* and were able to keep in touch with their vessel even though they were unable to make contact with the voyagers themselves.'

'Why was that, Counsellor?'

'Because the *Rllists* simply refused to acknowledge our existence,' said Sng Rmh. 'They persisted in regarding *gryllook* as an impossibility and ourselves as hallucinations. We hoped that by persisting in their folly they would eventually become wise, but, before that could happen, they had the singular misfortune to encounter a transitory oscitation in the

vicinity of Hrk and all contact was lost.'

'Poor things,' mourned the tender-hearted Orgypp. 'I wonder what happened to them?'

'*Oho* alone knows, child. No one who has ever entered an oscitation has ever succeeded in *hwoming*.'

'But surely Mgn Rkhs...?'

'The exception which proves the rule. Besides, he made a real old hash of it by all accounts.'

'And Zil's Shorge, Counsellor?'

'Ha? Hm,' grunted the old man. 'I was hoping you might have forgotten about him. Best to leave well alone, I'd say. My advice is to trot along home, have yourselves a good *grok* and come and see me again next week if he's still troubling you. Oh, and it might be as well to go easy on those mushrooms. We don't want you both coming out all over in blue spots, do we?'

He smiled at them. The audience was at an end.

Gran had had a line up at Bingo and had won a set of four pink plastic egg-cups. As a return on her investment Margery worked it out at 15p a cup, or about six times what the prize was worth. She did not make the calculation on purpose to annoy Gran but simply because that was the way her mind tended to operate. Nevertheless the old lady took it as a personal affront, sulked all the way home, and complained that her shoes were pinching. This was her way of getting back at her daughter who had bought the shoes in a sale only the week before. By the time they reached No. 27 Laburnum Crescent a definite tension could be said to have developed between them. Margery stabbed her key into the lock, twisted it brutally and thrust open the door. The first thing which caught her eye was George's coat which had already fallen off the overloaded peg. 'Why is it I'm the only person in this house who can ever manage to hang anything up?' she demanded rhetorically in what the family called her 'long-suffering' voice. 'I don't know, really I don't.'

Gran hobbled into the hall, subsided with a theatrical groan on to the bottom tread of the stairs and eased off a shoe. 'Told you so,' she announced triumphantly. 'Blister there the size of a half-crown. Just you feel it.'

The lounge door opened and Katie emerged. "'Lo Mum. 'Lo Gran. I got four house stars.'

'Go and get Gran's slippers for her, love.'

'I got four house stars, Mum.'

'Where'd you leave them, Gran? They're under her bed, I think. Dad gave you your tea all right, did he?'

Katie flounced off in a huff.

'What's got into her?' sighed Margery.

'Where's George?' demanded Gran. 'I want him to see this blister.'

'Let's hang your coat up, Mum. Come on, up you get.'

'I can manage. I'm not senile, you know.'

'No one said you were. Katie! Are you getting those slippers?'

'You've got a very piercing voice, Margery. Did anyone ever tell you that? Very shrill and piercing. What your Dad used to call a bodkin voice.'

'I'm sorry.'

'I daresay it isn't altogether your fault. It's more the way your chest's built. The flatter the chest the higher the voice—that's what your Dad used to say.'

'That's a real load of old rubbish, Mum.'

'Maybe so, maybe not, but there's no call to be narky, Marge.'

'I'm not being narky. Besides I wasn't aware that I had a flat chest.'

'Well, you've got a bodkin voice all right. A proper bodkin.'

Katie re-appeared with the slippers and handed them over. Gran received them with her sweetest smile. 'Bless you, lovey. You didn't mind running a little errand for your old Gans, did you?'

'Of course not, Gran.'

'Where's Dad, Katie?'

'Upstairs I s'pose.'

'George! *We're back!*'

'I got four house stars this week, Gran.'

'*Did* you now, lovey! Well, if she isn't the clever girl! Four house stars! Come here and let your old Gran give you a kiss. And guess what? Your silly old Gran won a prize at Bingo.'

'Did you, Gran? Really? What is it? Show me.'

Margery caught sight of her wan image in the mirror, pulled back her shoulders and made a brave attempt to smile. 'Tomorrow I'll treat myself to a new bra,' she vowed silently. 'God, I wish I didn't feel so *tired*.'

'*The flatlands of Knyff*,' wrote George, '*had in their time seen many strange growths but none stranger than the sulphur fungus of Cryth*.' He read the sentence through, crossed out '*seen*' and substituted '*spawned*', then sucked the end of his ball-point and gazed blindly out over the suburban roofscape. An illustration from a childhood storybook floated into his memory—a long-nosed gnome in a green hat was sitting at the door of a little house which he had built inside a toadstool. The toadstool was bright yellow with blue spots. George bent over his notebook once more. '*For as far as the eye could see, thousands upon thousands of bright little yellow globes were thrusting up through the spongy soil like ...*' Again he paused. Like what? Eggs? No, he really wanted something more *pushy*. Thumbs? Hardly. How about eyeballs?

'George! Phone!'

'Bugger,' muttered George and called out fretfully: 'All right, I'm *coming*!'

Jennifer Veronica Lawlor, B.Sc. (but only just), younger daughter of James Claypole Lawlor M.D. and Winfred Lawlor (Roedean '39-'46), lay back at full length on the divan in her bed-sitting room, cradled the red telephone receiver

against her left ear, pulled up her skirt, thrust her left hand down under the elastic of her micromesh tights and scratched her groin thoughtfully. A six foot square blown-up photograph of Che Guevara's right eye regarded her incuriously from the wall at the foot of the bed.

'Hello? Cringe here.'

'George? This is Jenny. Jenny Lawlor. Look, are you doing anything particular this evening?'

'Well, I, er. . . No, not really. Why?'

'I've just discovered that the College Film Society is putting on an s.f. show at 8.30. They've got hold of that Chris Meeker thing I was telling you about and a couple of Czech shorts. Why don't you come along?'

'But I'm not a member.'

'As my guest, of course.'

'Oh, but are you sure that. . . I mean, I wouldn't like to—'

'You don't sound exactly enthused at the prospect.'

'Oh I am, I am. It's just that I wasn't expecting. . . You caught me off-balance.'

'O.K. then, that's settled. Look, let's meet up at the hay market at half seven.'

'Where's that?'

'Corner of Prince's Street and Colbert Road. *You* know. *The Hay Wain*.'

'Oh, there. All right. Half past seven. Thanks very much. I'm looking forward to it.'

'That's better. I'm not dragging you away from your conubial bliss or anything, am I?'

'No, no. Nothing on at all tonight. I daresay they'll be delighted to see the back of me.'

'My! How you do underestimate yourself, Mr. Cringe. 'Bye.'

Jenny dropped the receiver back on to its cradle, yawned, and consulted her watch. Then she sat up, pulled a substantial volume entitled *Intermediate Physics* from the wall-niche bookshelf behind the divan, slipped her hand into the

exposed slot and drew out a square tin labelled 'Golden Twist'. From the tin she extracted a packet of cigarette papers. Having peeled one off she sprinkled along its fold some greyish-looking herb and, on top of this, laid a few shreds of tobacco. After some inexpert fumbling she succeeded in rolling the suspect mixture into an untidy tube, licked the edge of the paper, smoothed it down, and twirled up the ends. That done she closed up the tin and returned it to its place of concealment. She then got up, clicked the lock on the door, switched on her record player and guided the pick-up into the groove which held Simon and Garfunkel's rendering of *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. As the first chords crept on to the air she struck a match, lit up, inhaled copiously, and lying back on the divan, surrendered herself to whatever vibrations happened to be around.

'Who was that?' called Margery.

George walked through into the kitchen and discovered his wife busy at the sink. 'That? Oh, Sam Mostyn.'

'It didn't sound like him when I answered.'

'Jenny Lawlor made the connection, then Sam came on.'

'What did he want?'

'To remind me there's a Nuffield meeting at the Tech. this evening.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'I haven't seen you since you got back, have I? How was the bingo?'

'Need you ask?'

'Gran difficult?'

'Not more than usual.'

'Well, that's something, I suppose. Would you like a drink?'

'No thanks. I'm surprised there's any left.'

The spark of remorse in George was abruptly extinguished. 'I'd better go and dig out some of the bumf they sent me. I'll have a bite out somewhere.'

'What time will you be back?'

'Latish. There's bound to be a discussion afterwards. Don't you bother to wait up.'

'I wasn't going to.'

Margery bent down to get a fresh bottle of detergent out of the cupboard under the sink. As she did so her hair fell forward and exposed the back of her neck and the lobes of her ears. George didn't even notice.

Hand in hand Zil and Orgypp made their way home across Vohl Park. The bordering duskflowers were out, glowing richly in the moonshadow, freighting the warm air with their mysterious, languid scent. Overhead the sky was a frozen blizzard of stars.

'Sng Rmh didn't believe us, Zil.'

'What makes you say that, Orgypp?'

'He thought it was those mushrooms.'

'Maybe it was.'

Orgypp tilted her face and looked up at the sky. 'Shorge is up there somewhere, Zil. I know it.'

'But that would mean Urth's there too.'

'Well? Why not? Sng Rmh didn't say it couldn't be, did he?'

'All he said was, "Everything exists in *oho*".'

Orgypp suddenly stopped dead in her tracks and clutched Zil fiercely by the arm. 'Of *course*!' she exclaimed. 'Why didn't we think of it?'

Experience had made Zil decidedly apprehensive of Orgypp's inspirations. 'Think of what?' he enquired uneasily.

'*Gryllook* him!'

'*Gryllook* who, Orgypp?'

'Why, Shorge, of course!'

'But that's impossible! No Urthling can *gryllook*. You know that.'

'But only because you haven't *made* them, Zil! You could go back and write it in. Then Shorge can come to Chnas.'

'Orgypp, you're crazy. Shorge is here already. In *here*! In

my head. That's what Sng Rmh meant when he said he exists in *oho*. *I exist in oho, therefore Shorge does.*'

'Then why did I hear him in the sky-mirror?'

'I don't know.'

'You heard him too, Zil.'

Zil was silent.

'You did, didn't you?'

No response.

'Zil?'

'Yes,' sighed Zil. 'I heard him, Orgypp. As clearly as I hear you now.'

The Hay Wain was the pub most frequented by students from the university but only because it was the one nearest to the campus gates. It had nothing else to recommend it unless by chance one happened to take an interest in the methods of the British Police. During term time *The Hay Wain* was drug-raided, on average, twice a month and was known affectionately to the local Force as 'the Saturday milk run'.

George coaxed the six-year-old family Mini into the 'Customers Only' car park, switched off the engine and looked across at the doorway of the Saloon Bar. He was conscious of a sense of apprehension out of all proportion to the peccadillo of having deceived Margery. Seizing life by the throat was all very well providing you knew just where to put your thumbs. He remembered that unfinished sentence still lying on his desk and dismissed it. Oh for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts! Suddenly resolute he wrenched open the car door, scrambled out and strode purposefully across the puddled asphalt.

The saloon was a buzz of beards and beads. George insinuated himself among them, bought a half of Worthington and began to peer about for Jenny.

'Hel-lo, Dad! Fancy seeing you here!'

He swung round so abruptly he almost shot his beer down the neck of his eldest daughter's kaftan.

'Marilyn!'

'Having a night on the tiles, are we?'

'Just meeting some people from school. I didn't realize this was one of your haunts.'

'It isn't really. Keith, this is my dad. Dad, Keith.'

'Hi, there.'

'Hi.'

Male eyes met across the abyss, smiled shyly and glanced away.

'Who're you meeting, Dad?'

George temporized. 'Mr. Mostyn and Miss Lawlor.'

'Do I know them?'

'No, I don't think so. Since your Bagshot Road days.' A pause: a veritable hiatus. 'Well, I suppose I'd better go and hunt them up. Look after yourselves.'

'See you, Dad.'

George left them an apologetic grin and filtered out of the Saloon Bar. He guessed that Marilyn would not tell Margery about their meeting because she hardly ever told Margery anything. He recalled with an unhappy shudder the occasion when his wife had discovered that her first-born was on the Pill and he had been dragooned into 'talking to her'. Agonies of mumbling awkwardness out of which, somehow—miraculously it had seemed to George—an understanding had been reached between them. The principal outcome had been the opening of a Post Office account in his daughter's name and a bi-annual allowance of £25, which can hardly have been what Margery had had in mind. But it had bought peace in our time, a regular supply of *Nonova*, and sufficient mutual toleration to make home life endurable. With inflation being what it was George reckoned that he'd got a bargain.

Jenny appeared at a quarter to eight. She had tied back her long hair and was wearing an ankle-length garment that

looked as if it might have been assembled from the hide of an albino woolly rhinoceros. 'Do you like it?' she asked.

'Yes,' responded George gallantly. 'It reminds me of *Doctor Zhivago*. What can I get you to drink?'

'Vodka and lime, please.'

When he returned with the drink it was to find her in conversation with a tall, lank-haired character who blinked incessantly through a pair of enormous steel-rimmed spectacles. Jenny introduced him as Wendell Hammerstein. He seized George's hand in a grip of surprising firmness. 'Glad t' meetcher, Cringe.'

'Hello,' said George affably.

'I *like* that!' cried Wendell. 'He vibes me!'

Jenny unbuttoned her coat far enough to reveal that under it she was wearing at least a see-through blouse and no bra. It seemed to George that the room had suddenly become very warm. He hoped Marilyn was already off the premises. He turned and clutched Wendell like a straw. 'Are you interested in science fiction, Hammerstein?'

'You could say that, Cringe.'

'Wendell *writes* it,' said Jenny.

'Oh,' said George, feeling as if he had been checkmated on the very first move. 'Are you at the University?'

'On and off, Cringe. Or, alternatively, off and on.'

'He's doing a Ph.D.' said Jenny. 'On porn.'

'*Porn?* Pornography?'

'Erotica, Cringe.'

George took a deep gulp at his beer and suddenly found he was giggling uncontrollably.

'What gives, man?' enquired Wendell.

George shook his head apologetically. 'On a grant?' he spluttered.

'Roosevelt Foundation.'

'Do they *know*?'

'Know what?'

'What you're doing?'

Wendell blinked like a stroboscope. 'Man, they chose it *for* me. I offered Subconscious Symbolism in the work of Beatrix Potter.'

'And they turned that down?'

Someone else had got in first.'

Tough luck,' said George.

'That's life, man. Mostly shit.' Wendell nodded to them. 'Guess I'll be seeing you later.' He backed away and disappeared into the crowd.

'What name does he write under?' asked George.

'I don't know,' said Jenny. 'I've never read anything he's written.'

'Is he *really* doing a Ph.D. on porn?'

'Oh yes. He's just got back from Denmark.'

'Field work?'

I suppose you could call it that. He was telling me about it. They've impounded all his slides at Harwich and he's got to con the Faculty into giving him a signed authorization that he's a bona fide research student before they'll release them.' She dipped her hand into her pocket, pulled out a 100p piece and handed it to him. 'One more each on me,' she said. 'Then we'd better be on our way.'

Sng Rmh laid aside the *ghlune* which he had been fingering meditatively ever since Zil and Orgypp had left. Reaching behind him he twitched aside the arras and tugged the tassel of a concealed rope. In the depths of the Sanctuary a bell jangled. The two acolytes, Sylf and Ptl, eyed each other. 'Your turn,' said Sylf.

The bell jangled again.

'Both of us,' said Ptl. 'Better bring him too. In case.'

Sylf stooped, gathered the reluctant *prr* into her arms, and they hurried out.

When they reached the consultery they found the old man striding up and down like an animated cobweb. They curt-sied perfunctorily and the *prr* seized the opportunity to

leap from Sylf's arms. 'Master?' queried the two acolytes in harmonious unison.

'Sorry to disturb you, my dears, but I require your assistance. I must read the *rhns*.'

Sylf and Ptl treated each other to a covert eye-groan.

Sng Rmh paused in his pacing and rubbed his hands briskly. 'The fluence seems remarkably strong so I am inclined to dispense with the preliminaries and get straight down to business. Ptl, run and fetch the epergne, there's a good child. Sylf, you can set the tapers.'

The two girls, mightily relieved to learn that they were to be spared the agonizing boredom of a full ritual *rh*n-read, hastened to do the old man's bidding, while he shucked off his quilted sky-robe and flung himself precipitately into a brisk round of callisthenics. These concluded in three double entrechats and a tip-toe to full knees bend which paid tribute both to his remarkable vigour and his prime physical condition.

Ptl returned carrying a large, shallow pewter dish. Its inner surface was divided into a chased pentagram, each section of which contained a *rh*nic cipher. Lying in the central pentagon were five, round, coloured pebbles, and balanced athwart the dish were two long tail feathers from a male *trll*. Ptl placed the dish on the floor, scooped up the pebbles and handed them to Sng Rmh who was now perspiring freely from his exertions.

Sylf had succeeded in arranging five tapers in tall iron holders and in setting them roughly equidistant from the epergne. She now blew out the ones in the wall sconces and joined Ptl.

Sng Rmh glanced round critically at the arrangements, made a trifling adjustment to the position of one of the tapers, nodded and subsided cross-legged before the epergne. Sylf and Ptl knelt one on either side of him. Each picked up a *trll* feather.

Sng Rmh placed the coloured pebbles on his open palm,

lifted them in the air and then popped them into his mouth.

Thatching his fingers together he raised his arms and cushioned the back of his head in his hands. The big toe of his right foot twitched to signify that he was ready.

Sylf and Ptl giggled, twirled their feathers and applied the tips teasingly to the old man's naked flesh. No corner escaped their shameless probing. Busy as bluebottles they flitted here and there rootling in the shady places, caressing the twittering nerve endings until the ancient epidermis began to twitch, to quiver and to ripple with the incipient hysteria of a seismic mirth. Sng Rmh's cheeks began to shake; he snorted. Ptl's feathertip alighted on his nose, brushed it, and then crept wickedly into his left nostril. At the same instant Sylf's wriggled along under his chin and flicked up into his right ear. Sng Rmh heaved like a tethered balloon. With one accord the two girls burst into unrestrained laughter and applied their free fingers to the tips of their master's twitching *thrunngs*. The Counsellor, goaded beyond endurance, broke and doubled over. 'Oho!' he howled. 'Oho-ho-ho ho ho! Ha ha ha! He-ee-ee! Oho-o-o-o!'

The pebbles exploded from his lips like grapeshot and rattled into the epergne, where they lay totally ignored, while Ptl and Sylf, now wholly embroiled in the spirit of the service, flung themselves upon their howling master who rolled backwards on to the floor clasping the girls to him and wriggling in an abandonment of *ohoian* mirth that sent the tears spouting in showers from his eyes.

The *prr* who had seen it all before anyway, yawned disdainfully and set about laundering his ears.

Eventually the trio simmered down and wiped their watering eyes. Ptl crawled over to the bench and returned with her master's quilted robe and conical hat. After a great deal of chuckling and snuffling the two neophytes managed to get him dressed and buttoned up. He kissed them both, sighed profoundly, and bent over the epergne.

As though held in place by the very finger of *oho* himself,

the five pebbles lay each at the furthest tip of the five-pointed star!

Sng Rmh stared at them incredulously. Never in a lifetime of divination had he encountered such a formation and he very much doubted if anyone else had either. It was the inherent nature of *rhn*-stones to seek the lowest point of the bowl and yet here they were seemingly glued to the highest. Glued? He stretched out his hand, gingerly lifted the nearest pebble and examined it. Apart from the slight dampness of his spittle there was nothing. He dropped it into the floor of the dish and at once it trundled back up the slope until it was again nestling in the corner from which he had plucked it.

‘What is it, Master?’

‘Tell me what you see here, Sylf, my child.’

Sylf told him.

‘And you Ptl?’

‘The same, Master.’

The *prr*, its ablutions concluded to its satisfaction, came sauntering over to investigate. No sooner had it set paw within the circle of tapers than it came to an abrupt full stop. Its tail shot up, its back arched, and its fur jerked upright. Next moment with a wild screech of terror it had clawed its way to the top of the arras where it clung, growling and spitting, its eyes glowing like emerald coals.

The three Chnassians regarded it in astonishment. Although such behaviour was not unknown among *prrs* it was certainly most unusual. Sng Rmh tugged his beard thoughtfully. ‘Run and fetch me Jhn Nwt on *Divination*, Ptl,’ he said. ‘Second shelf down from the top, about half way along.’

Within a couple of minutes the acolyte returned staggering under the burden of a huge, dusty tome bound in ancient *brk*-skin. She deposited it on the floor beside her master and went to help Sylf coax the *prr* down from its refuge.

Sng Rmh opened the book, ran his finger down the list

of contents and then heaved back the pages till he reached the chapter dealing with pentagrams. As he read he glanced up from time to time and frowned at the epergne. The unnatural pebbles were still clinging to their positions and seemed in no way inclined to relinquish them.

At last he found the only thing that seemed as if it might be even vaguely relevant. At the very end of the section allocated to pentagrams the venerable author had appended a footnote to which he had given the curious title: '*Appropos of Mgn Rkhs*'. It read as follows. 'It may be that ultimately *oho* in his infinite humour shall choose to manifest himself in a jest so magnificently preposterous that even his most assiduous and gifted interpreter shall be bereft of guidance. Skill in divination will avail him nothing then for his non-senses will inform him that is is not: that is-not is.'

Sng Rmh read it twice through forwards and once backwards. Either way he could make nothing of it. And as for calling it '*Appropos of Mgn Rkhs*'. What could Mgn Rkhs possibly have to...? 'Orgypp!' he murmured. 'Now why in the name of *oho* was she so—'

At the mention of Orgypp's name one of the pebbles detached itself, rolled down the slope, coasted once around the pentagon and then returned to its starting place.

Sng Rmh observed its progress with alert interest. 'Orgypp?' he said again.

Obediently the pebble retraced its curious journey.

Sng Rmh scratched his right ear. 'Zil Bryn?' he offered.

With one accord the other four pebbles left their nestling places, rolled to the bottom of the epergne, executed a stately clockwise circuit of the pentagon and then climbed the slope to their respective points of the star.

Sng Rmh pondered.

Ptl and Sylf finally succeeded in persuading the *pr* to relinquish the arras. It descended in a rush and quit the consultancy so fast that its five shadows could barely keep up with it. The young acolytes approached the Counsellor. 'Do you

need us any longer, Master?' enquired Sylf deferentially.

'Eh?' said Sng Rmh absently.

'Can we go now?' demanded the more forthright Ptl.

'Go? Yes yes, of course, my dears. I myself shall be going out presently. I have a call to make on the Bryns.'

'But isn't it rather late for visiting, Master?'

'True, true,' nodded the old man. 'But since the *rhns* appear to demand it I feel it incumbent upon myself to obey them.'

At ten minutes to nine there was an unscheduled power cut on the university campus. Since the film show had begun fifteen minutes later than billed, the audience had seen only five minutes of the first film before the projector lamp died. A chorus of exasperated groans and catcalls rose from the aficionados who had assembled in the Science Lecture Theatre.

'Sod the fucking unions!'

'Shut up, Fascist swine!'

'Maoist turd!'

'What a way to run a fucking country!'

'Call this a fucking country?'

'Could it be a fuse?'

Cigarette lighters flickered into flame. Someone even produced a stub of candle. At the back of the hall a door opened and a voice called in apologetically: 'Power cut, I'm afraid.'

'Oh, brilliant!'

'Give him his Ph.D.!'

'Any idea how long, Felix?'

'Sheila's gone to try and find out.'

'Good thinking, Batman!'

George turned to Jenny. 'That *is* a shame,' he said. 'I was really enjoying it.'

'But isn't it a lousy print? It looked as if it was snowing.'

'Oh. Wasn't it?'

'Indoors?'

'I see what you mean. Could you read the subtitles?'
'What subtitles?'
'I'm sure there were some.'
'I can't imagine why since no one ever said anything.'
'But those signs. . . .'
'They were in Czech.'
'No, I meant the translations at the bottom.'
'Oh, *those*. Wasn't that German?'
'Was it? Well, I suppose that would explain it.'
'Not unless you understand German it wouldn't.'
'No, I meant explain why I couldn't read them.'
'Christ, my feet are freezing!'
'I suppose the heating'll be going off.'
'Hi, there, Cringe! Enjoying yourself?'
'Oh, hello. Is that you, Wendell?'
'A metaphysical speculation, man. It's too dark to be sure.'
'If the power doesn't come on again in five minutes,' said Jenny grimly, 'sod the culture. I'm going back to the pub.'

As Zil and Orgypp approached their dwelling a sapphire-and-flame winged gloamer mistook the embroidery on Orgypp's robe for a duskflower. It floated down and came to rest on her sleeve. As she watched it stroking the material with its furry feet in a vain attempt to persuade the blossom to surrender its nectar she felt unaccountably sad. 'If I were *oho*,' she sighed, 'I would never let anything be mistaken. Not even a gloamer.'

Zil smiled. 'But for all you know that gloamer may be very happy *grokking* your sleeve. He has found the biggest duskflower in Vohl and it is all his.'

'It has no nectar,' said Orgypp.

'And what makes you so sure that he is seeking nectar? Perhaps he is seeking *hwyllth*.'

'Gloamers *are* *hwyllth*, Zil. They don't seek it.'

'How do you know?'

The gloamer itself expressed no opinion on the matter. Having dusted off its antenna it flexed its wings and floated off into the moonlight. As Orgypp watched it flicker out of sight she felt as if she were poised on the brink of some tremendous gulf of *ohoian* revelation. But all she replied was: 'I know because I know.'

'How like a woman,' chuckled Zil.

The Hay Wain had not escaped the power cut but the landlord having had the foresight to lay in several gross of candles, business was, if anything, even more brisk than usual. Jenny, Wendell, and a girl friend of Wendell's called Samantha, squeezed themselves into a corner while George went to forage for alcohol. It took him the better part of ten minutes. He returned to find Wendell elucidating some obscure aspect of his Ph.D. thesis with the aid of some matchsticks and a bunch of pipe-cleaners. Jenny and Samantha appeared intrigued but sceptical.

George handed round the drinks. 'How are the feet?' he asked.

The question was directed at Jenny but Wendell, absorbed in his dissertation assumed it was intended for him. 'A shrewd point, that. The toes certainly have their part to play as clitoral stimulators, but it calls for a degree of dexterity well above the average. See here.' So saying he contorted one of the limbs of his model into a figure that made Samantha wince.

'Oh, I can't believe *that*, Wendell,' she protested. 'He'd have to be double-jointed.'

'Supple, certainly,' Wendell conceded. 'But it's not impossible. I've got photographs to prove it.'

'But what's the point?' said Jenny. 'I mean to say it can't *feel* that much different, can it?'

'I suppose there'd be a genuine sense of achievement,' mused Samantha. 'Like finding a new route up Mount Everest.'

'It's simply an art form,' said Wendell. 'Much like any other.'

'Not much like any other I can think of,' said Jenny.

George picked up the demonstration model and held it to the candlelight. Finding it produced in him an odd sensation of disquiet he laid it down again without comment.

Wendell blinked. 'Not for you, eh, man?'

George became conscious of their eyes upon him. He smiled shyly and gave a self-deprecating shrug. 'Well, I suppose it takes two...' he murmured.

Samantha giggled. 'Or three.'

'Let's not get kinky,' said Jenny. 'Is that how you're approaching it, Wendell. As an art form?'

'How else?' said Wendell. 'Pornography is mankind's exploration of his sensuous potential.'

'His ingenuity, you mean.'

'That too,' Wendell concurred. 'It's largely a question of permutation. Like Mediaeval Church music.'

Jenny grinned. 'How's your Gregorian plainsong, George?'

'So, so,' said George modestly.

'Mine too,' said Wendell. 'I'll have to brush it up.'

Samantha giggled again.

Jenny set down her glass. 'The next round's on me,' she said. 'But someone else will have to fetch them. I'm not diving into that scrum.'

'I'll go,' offered George. 'What's it to be?'

The lights came on again just before closing time to a chorus of ironic cheers. By then the four of them were fairly well away. Wendell had abandoned the subject of his thesis and was now pontificating upon s.f. He wagged his finger under George's nose. 'The point is, Cringe, that in science fiction it's the science that's the fiction and the fiction that's the truth.'

George nodded. 'That's very interesting, Wendell,' he said. 'Very interesting indeed.'

'Interesting? Hell, man, it's profound!' asserted Wendell.

'That too,' said George. 'Profoundly interesting, in fact.'

'Or truly profound,' said Jenny.

'Exactly,' said George, beaming round at her.

'A truth perceived by the imagination,' said Wendell, 'is infinitely truer than any mere fact. Infinitely. In a word, man, it's multi-dimensional.'

'All-embracing?' suggested George.

'All of that, Cringe. And more besides.'

'But, Wendell, it can't *happen*,' Samantha protested.

Wendell unhooked his glasses, breathed on them, wiped them on the bosom of Samantha's blouse, and replaced them. 'Anything that can be believed is an image of the truth. Right, Cringe?'

'Indisputable,' beamed George.

'But if I believe two and two make five that doesn't make it *true*!' wailed Samantha.

'If you believe it sincerely enough it does,' retorted Wendell.

'*Time, ladies and gentlemen! If you please!*'

'But that's nonsense.'

'Contrariwise,' said Wendell affably. 'What *you're* saying is that truth is merely a consensus of opinion as to what is true. Which is manifestly absurd.'

'Of course it's not.'

'The majority is always right, eh?'

'Well, obviously not *always*, but—'

'Never,' said Wendell. 'In nine cases out of ten the majority's wrong, and in the tenth it's right for the wrong reasons.'

'Such as what?' demanded Jenny.

Wendell blinked. 'Astrology.'

'Oh, Wendell! *Really!*'

'*Time, please, ladies and gentlemen!*'

'Wendell, you're incorrigible!'

Wendell only grinned.

In Chnas it is a rule hallowed by antiquity that no two

dwellingings standing within sight of one another shall look alike. The ideal abode reflects the personality of its inhabitants and resembles nothing but itself. For does not the very essence of *oho* lie in infinite diversity?

Sng Rmh, hurrying across Vohl Park in the moonlight, was searching for the villa which fitted his conception of the personalities of Zil and Orgypp. He paused before one shaped like a crouching *grndlhog*, then shook his head and moved on. Similarly he rejected a cosy-looking, two-storeyed female *thrunng*; a house-bote; and something that most nearly resembled four upended carrots if, indeed, it could be said to resemble anything at all. The old man snorted tolerantly and trotted on. 'Something fanciful,' he muttered, 'but not lacking in *hwyllth*. Orgypp will have seen to that. Must be around here somewhere. Ah—'

His eye had been caught by a building which matched his requirements perfectly. From the outside it appeared to be a cross between a small Georgian rectory (complete with wisteria-clad portico) and a miniature Bavarian *schloss*. From a window in one of the twin turrets at the rear of the house a light was gleaming. 'That will be Zil's study for sure,' chuckled the old man. 'Let's see what he's up to.' And gathering his fur cloak around him he scuttled up the stone-flagged driveway to the porch and tugged at the metal bell ring.

Orgypp opened the door herself. 'Why, Counsellor!' she exclaimed. 'This is an unexpected honour. I must confess I was not—'

'No, no, of course you weren't, Orgypp. I've called on a matter of some urgency otherwise I should not have dreamt of disturbing you at this late hour. I must ask you to forgive me. No, no, please, no ceremony I beseech you.'

Orgypp nodded and looked bewildered as well she might. 'Some little refreshment surely, Counsellor ... ?'

'Very well, child. But don't put yourself out.' He shrugged off his cloak and handed it to her. 'I take it Zil is available?'

'He's up in his study,' said Orgypp. 'I'll go and fetch him.'

'In the circumstances, Orgypp, it would suit my purposes excellently if I could see him up there.'

'Whatever you wish, Counsellor. Would a dish of *lakh* be to your liking?'

'Admirable, Orgypp.'

'Then if the Counsellor would be so good as to follow me...'

'What a charming house you have, Orgypp, to be sure. Full of surprises.'

'My heart brims.'

'You will join us, of course.'

'If the Counsellor wishes.'

'Yes, yes. It is essential. I am convinced that you may have an important part to play.'

Orgypp's eyes widened. Curiosity warred with decorum, and won. 'Then you will forgive my asking, Counsellor...?'

'Yes, Orgypp?'

'Could it be possible that your illustrious visit is in some way connected with Zil's Shorge?'

'Shorge? Ah, yes, now you mention it, he may well be the link that I am seeking.'

'The link between what, Counsellor?'

'Between the is-not and the is, Orgypp.'

'I *knew* it!' murmured Orgypp happily.

George's offer to drive Jenny back to her digs was willingly accepted. They said goodnight to Wendell and Samantha who departed on Samantha's scooter for an unspecified destination. George suspected that he had paid for rather more than his share of the evening's conviviality but he had no regrets. 'Wendell's quite a character, isn't he?' he said as he let in the clutch of the Mini and backed slowly out of the car park.

'He does his best,' Jenny agreed.

'What did he take his degree in?'

'Social Anthropology, I believe.'

George straightened up the wheel, eased himself round in his seat and nosed the car cautiously out into the main road. 'That line of his about truth and fact. What do you make of it?'

'Oh, that,' said Jenny. 'He doesn't know what he means himself.'

'But I believe he may have a valid point,' said George. 'I mean to say if you take something like E.S.P. for instance.'

'Go on.'

'Well, as scientists we'd have to say it doesn't exist. But that's only because we can't prove its existence empirically. Yet at the same time we can't prove its *non*-existence either. Now mightn't that be because we're trying to use scientific method to get at a non-scientific truth?'

'You think there is such a thing?'

'Good lord, yes,' said George. 'Don't you?'

'No.'

George glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. She was staring straight ahead through the windscreen. 'Well, as a for-instance, you're beautiful,' he said. 'That's a non-scientific truth.'

'On the contrary,' she retorted, 'it's just an opinion. In fact it probably isn't even that.' But her smile as she said it set George's pulse fluttering like a flag.

'How did Wendell put it?' he said. 'Anything that can be believed is an image of the truth? O.K., so I believe you're beautiful, therefore you are.'

'You're tight.'

'Maybe a shade,' George conceded. 'I usually do tend to tell the truth when I'm tight.'

'Then you'd better let me treat you to a coffee to sober you up. For your own peace of mind.'

'Excellent idea. What's still open at this time of night?'

'My kitchenette.'

'Ah,' said George. 'Well, in that case, perhaps...'

'Perhaps what?'

George swallowed. 'Thanks very much.'

'Beaufort Terrace,' said Jenny. 'It's the second on the left past the lights,' and she smiled again.

A few minutes later they drew up outside one of the tall Regency houses which had been converted at considerable expense into flatlets for post-graduate students. George made a last feeble attempt to obey the dictates of his super-ego. 'I really don't want to put you to an awful lot of bother....'

'You won't,' laughed Jenny. 'Come on.'

She led the way upstairs to the first floor, unlocked the door of Flat 3, switched on the lights and walked in. The first thing to confront George was Che Guevara's right eye. The second was Jenny's bra-less bust shimmering beneath its translucent blouse as she stripped off her coat. There was no doubt which George found the more unsettling. He dragged his glance away by main force and gestured nervously around. 'Very nice,' he said. 'Centrally heated too, isn't it?'

Jenny agreed that it was. 'The bathroom and loo are through there if you want them.'

While he was washing his hands George decided that the thing to do was to keep the conversation firmly on the impersonal level. As soon as he emerged he set about putting precept into practice. Jenny was nowhere to be seen so he raised his voice to carry through into the kitchenette. 'I had a glance through 2B's books this evening,' he carolled. 'That project of yours seems to be shaping up very nicely. Old Corbett'll probably give you an "A" for it. I know his tastes.'

There was no clearly audible response. Doggedly, George soldiered on. 'Of course the trouble with letting them construct their own telescopes is that the little bastards always try to swipe the lenses. You'll have to get them to turn out their pockets at the end of each lesson. The plasticene's expendable, of course, and so are the tubes.'

Far off, earthenware and metal were tinkling faintly. Jenny called something he couldn't catch. George grinned reminiscently. 'Old Corbett's a sucker for wall displays. A frieze on

the Solar System's bound to be worth at least a credit. Providing it's big enough. He's as short-sighted as a bat.'

The door opened and Jenny came in carrying a tray. 'Sorry,' she said, 'I could hardly hear a word you were saying in there.' She stooped and set the tray down on a coffee table. Her posture afforded George an uninterrupted view down the low neck of her blouse.

He felt his stomach contract. 'That project of yours with 2B,' he muttered.

'Oh not *shop!*' she protested. 'Anything but shop! Come and tell me why you think I'm beautiful. Unless you've changed your mind?'

'No,' croaked George. 'Oh no. I mean ... well, you see ...'

'Yes?' enquired Jenny mildly.

'I shouldn't really *be* here, should I?' he groaned desperately.

'But why on earth not?'

'Alone with you, I mean. Up here in your room.'

'But you *are* here. I invited you. Remember?'

George nodded at the unassailable truth of the statement.

'So sit down and enjoy your coffee.' She grinned at him, walked over to the record player, switched it on and set a record on the turntable.

George lowered himself gingerly on to the divan. Sudden and unbidden there floated into his mind that drawing he had found among 2B's books. He slipped his hand into his breast pocket and there it still was. He drew out the folded paper and, as he did so, he found himself sniggering uncontrollably.

Jenny adjusted the volume control and came across to him. 'What have you got there?'

Without saying a word George allowed her to take the paper from his hand. She glanced at the inscription, raised her eyebrows, and unfolded the drawing. 'Jesus!' she exclaimed and burst into laughter. 'Where on earth did you get this?'

'It fell out of one of the 2B books. My guess is Sybil Bosset's.'

'You know, just for a moment I thought *you'd* done it.'

'You didn't!'

'Well, it's obvious you fancy me.'

George emitted an untranscribable gulp.

'To *me* it's obvious, I mean.'

'And that doesn't shock you?'

'*Shock* me? What *do* you mean?'

'Well, *shock* you. I mean—well—after all, I am. . . .'

'Old enough to be my father?'

George nodded dumbly.

Jenny shook her head. Lifting one of the mugs from the tray she handed it to him. 'So presumably you're also old enough to know your own mind.'

It seemed to George at that moment as if the Old Man of the Sea had climbed down off his back. He looked up at Jenny and then glanced all around the room as if to convince himself that this was real and was actually happening to him. And as he did so he began to chuckle with sheer, simple-minded happiness.

Orgypp spooned three measures of aromatic *lakh* leaves into the porcelain infuser and nudged it into position under the snout of the metal dragon. The obedient beast nuzzled down into the leaves and snorted steam cheerfully through its flared nostrils. When the *lakh* was at the correct temperature the steam changed to jets of boiling water and the hissing to a throaty rumble.

While this was in progress Orgypp arranged three shallow bowls on a lacquered tray and placed a saucer of sugared *frm* petals in the centre. With her head held slightly to one side she studied the tray, then removed one of the bowls and replaced it with another of a slightly different pattern. An amber *frm* fork was laid beside each bowl so that its twin prongs just impinged upon the dish of petals. Orgypp rotated

the tray slowly one complete circuit, nodded to herself, and touched her fingertips to her temples. The rumbling from the infuser ceased abruptly and, with a quiet click, the dragon squatted back on its brazen haunches. Picking up the tray in one hand and the infuser in the other Orgypp crossed the hallway and mounted the stairs.

She set down her burdens on a spindle-legged side-table outside Zil's study, tapped on the panel of the door and lifted the latch. Sng Rmh and Zil were bent over what she immediately recognized as the script of Zil's story. So absorbed were they that they did not notice her entry and she had to cough to draw attention to herself. They glanced up, rose to their feet and bowed. Orgypp curtsied in return, hastened out and came back with the tray which she set down before them. There was a brief formal exchange of polite responses, then the two men resumed their seats.

Orgypp poured a small amount of *lakh* into one of the bowls, lifted it to her lips and then passed it to Sng Rmh. He accepted it with a grave smile, bowed, sipped and passed the bowl to Zil. Zil went through the same little ritual before handing it back to Orgypp. She replaced it on the tray, rapidly filled the other two bowls and then topped up her own. That done she lifted her fork, speared a twinkling *frm* petal and popped it into her mouth. 'Is your discussion proving fruitful?' she enquired.

Zil referred the question to Sng Rmh. The old man set down his bowl, dabbed his lips with a corner of his sleeve and forked in a mouthful of the frosted petals. 'We're on the track of something, Orgypp, but *oho* alone knows what.'

'May I inquire to what specific circumstance we owe the happiness of your visit, Counsellor?'

Sng Rmh told her about the *rhn* reading.

Orgypp nodded thoughtfully. 'And you have encountered nothing like it before?'

'Nor, I'll warrant, has anyone else, Orgypp. By the by, I've been meaning to ask you about Mgn Rkhs.'

‘Counsellor?’

The old man crunched into another forkful of *frm* petals, brushed some sugar crumbs from his whiskers and nodded emphatically. ‘There’s some tie-up there which I can’t sort out. You brought *Nohwom* along with you this evening, and when I hunted through Jhn Nwt’s *Divination* I found he was directing me to Mgn Rkhs. What do you make of that?’

‘I am at a loss, Counsellor.’

‘That makes two of us,’ grunted Sng Rmh.

‘Mgn Rkhs is supposed to have been an ancestor of Orgypp’s,’ said Zil.

‘Eh?’ The old man’s left eyebrow cocked sharply. ‘Is this true? Who says so?’

‘Oh, that’s just a family legend, Counsellor. I remember my great-great-grandmother, Grll Grng—’

‘Grll Grng? She was your ancestress? Well, well, well. But go on, child.’

‘When I was very little she once gave me a copy of *The Testament of Mgn Rkhs* and told me it was the work of an ancestor of mine. But she was very old then and she may not have known what she was saying at the time.’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ affirmed Sng Rmh. ‘Old Grll was as clear as spring water right up to the moment she saw the point of the last great jest. And I should know. I chuckled with her to the end.’

‘I never knew that, Counsellor.’

‘If Grll Grng said Mgn Rkhs was your ancestor then you can take it from me he was, Orgypp. But where does that leave us?’

Orgypp shook her head. ‘He—Mgn Rkhs—couldn’t be, well, somehow mixed up with Zil’s Shorge, could he?’

‘How do you mean, “mixed up”?’

‘Well, *be* him somehow?’

‘Orgypp, why must you persist in speaking of Shorge as if he’s a real person?’ said Zil severely. ‘I really do find it particularly unhelpful.’

'Don't be hard on her, Zil,' chuckled Sng Rmh. 'Take it as a compliment.'

'But you don't understand, Counsellor. It's getting worse and worse. Why, tonight she even went so far as to suggest I could teach him *gryllook!*'

Orgypp blushed scarlet and buried her nose in her bowl.

Zil realized he had gone too far and felt properly ashamed of himself.

Sng Rmh dislodged a persistent morsel of *frm* petal from between his front teeth by rooshing a mouthful of *lakh* back and forth between them. 'Well, why can't you?' he said mildly. 'You're in charge there, aren't you?'

'But that's not the point, Counsellor. What I'm endeavouring to do is to construct a logical counterpart to Chnas—a sort of satirical "*Rllist*" Chnas if you can—'

'Logical?' snorted the old man. 'What's logical about having your Urthlings all different colours?'

'Oh, that's all explained in an earlier chapter,' said Zil. 'I assure you it's—'

'And this—what did you call it?—' the old man rummaged around in the pages of Zil's script—' "*war*". That's logical too, I suppose?'

Poor Zil. How he wished he'd never chosen the word. 'It's Urth-logic, Counsellor,' he said desperately. 'Not Chnasian logic.'

'I somehow didn't think it was that,' grunted the old man.

'I think Urth exists,' said Orgypp loyally.

Zil smiled a grateful blessing at her.

'Well, if it does,' chuckled Sng Rmh, 'it must surely be the craziest place in all *oho*.'

'But only to *us*, Counsellor,' insisted Zil. 'Shorge Gringe doesn't think it's crazy.'

'He does a bit,' said Orgypp.

'Well, a bit perhaps,' conceded Zil, who would in truth have been prepared to grant her almost anything in return for her support.

'That's why he's going to *grok* with Shennifer,' she explained.

'Yes, that's true,' mused Zil. 'Urthlings should *grok* only within their own pair-bonds.'

Sng Rmh looked from one to the other and shook his head. 'Perhaps I'd better take your script home with me and study it in more detail,' he said. 'Have you got a copy?'

'I'm deeply honoured, Counsellor, though I suspect you may find it a little confusing in places.'

'I can well believe that,' chuckled Sng Rmh. 'In the meantime it might be as well if you took a short rest from your creative labours, Zil. Just in case, you understand.'

'Just in case of what, Counsellor?' frowned Zil, who did not understand at all.

'In case I'm right, the Counsellor means, Zil,' said Orgypp.

Sng Rmh beamed at her. 'Grll Grng's great, great grandchild has inherited her remarkable perception. She must come over to the Sanctuary and play through some duets with me one evening.'

'The Counsellor is too kind,' murmured Orgypp and blushed again, this time with wholly unaffected pleasure.

Zil picked up a sheaf of his script and turned over a few pages wonderingly. 'But I don't understand,' he muttered. 'I made it all up. How could it *be*?'

'I'm not saying it *is*, Zil. Frankly from the little I've read of your Urth I don't see how it *could* be! But there's no doubt at all in my mind that something very much out of the ordinary is brewing up, and in some mysterious fashion you seem to have landed yourself right in the middle of it. I know the *rhns* aren't infallible, but when they do their level best to tell me they don't know what in *oho*'s going on, then I know I'd be even crazier than one of your Urthlings if I didn't sit up and pay some attention.' He paused, twirled his moustache pensively, and then added: 'Now, as you're fully aware, I'm not empowered to do anything more than offer you sage advice and you're perfectly at liberty to reject it, but

what I'm going to suggest is this. I'll take your script home with me and peruse it in detail. If, when I've done that, I can't see your way ahead any more clearly than I can now then, with your permission of course, I'll lay the problem before the Guidance Council. I admit it's not a very inspired piece of therapy but it's the best I can offer in the circumstances.'

Zil gawped. 'The *Council*! Do you really think . . . ?'

'Yes, I do,' the old man assured him. 'I'm not saying it'll come to that, of course, but if it did I presume you'd agree to attend?'

Zil nodded hazily.

'Excellent,' said Sng Rmh. 'And now it appears that I have some hard reading ahead of me. So, with your gracious permission, Orgypp, I will take my leave and also a copy of—what do you call it, Zil?—*Shorge Cringe's Pilgrimage*?''

'“Gringe's”,' corrected Zil. '*Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage*. I've subtitled it: “A Story of the Planet Urth.”'

'What an imagination!' chuckled the old man. 'The planet Urth. Well, well.'

Orgypp and Zil saw him to the door, helped him into his cloak, and waved goodbye from the porch. When the Counsellor had vanished in the direction of the Sanctuary, Zil turned to Orgypp with a dazed look in his eyes. 'The Council,' he murmured. 'Just think of it, Orgypp! The publicity! Why, it would be even better than a write-up by Cryl Cnt in *The Grok*!'

'Maybe you'll even get that too,' she said. 'Who knows?'

George felt rather like an animal in a zoo who finds that the keeper has inadvertently left the cage door open. Confronted with freedom he simply could not believe in his good fortune. So he tiptoed to the open door of his cage, peeped out timidly at the scenery and found the view outside wholly enchanting.

Jenny sat on the floor sipping her coffee and surveying him

with amused eyes. 'What did you say?' she asked.

'Eh?' he responded dreamily.

'You said something. It sounded like "orgy".'

'Orgypp? Did I say that?'

'Yes. What does it mean?'

George blushed faintly. 'It's a name,' he said. 'A character. Someone I made up.'

'Oh.' Jenny took another sip at her mug. 'What made you say it?'

'I—*she*—is rather like you.'

'Like *me*?'

'Well, not altogether,' said George. 'She's a bit shorter than you are. But she looks rather like you. The same sort of mouth. And eyes. Same sort of smile too.'

'She sounds simply fascinating. Tell me about her.'

'You really want to know?'

'Yes, I really do.'

'I thought perhaps you were being polite,' George explained. 'Well, she's in a sort of story I'm writing—I suppose you *could* call it s.f. in a way. But not Wendell's sort of s.f. Not mainstream. It's more a kind of saga of everyday life set on a different galaxy. A sort of s.f. "Archers" in a way. I call their planet "Agenor". The central character's called Zil. He's a pretty ordinary sort of type in most ways. Orgypp's his—well, I suppose you'd have to say "wife", but on Agenor they don't have marriage like we do.'

'Oh,' said Jenny. 'Don't they? What do they have?'

'They *grok*.'

'They *what*?'

'*Grok*,' said George. 'It's a bit like our sex in some ways—only much better.'

'It sounds great.'

'It is,' said George. 'And they can do it with anyone or all together. It's their sort of religion.'

'How do they do it?'

'Well,' said George, 'to tell the truth I'm not exactly sure.'

It's something they do with their *thrunngs*. They're a kind of little extra limb.'

'Ah,' nodded Jennifer. 'They all have them do they?'

'Oh yes. Two each.'

'All the same?'

'Basically, yes, but there's a very subtle difference. If you try thinking of a *thrunng* as being a bit like—well, say a glove. Now depending on which role you're taking in a *grok* your *thrunng* is either an *outside out* glove or an *inside out* glove. Male or female according to inclination. Neat, eh?'

'Sensational,' said Jenny.

'Oh, they're miles ahead of us,' said George.

'And what gave you the idea of writing this?'

'I don't honestly know. In a way I think it's been around in the back of my mind for as long as I can remember. Writing it down is really rather like remembering it as I go along.'

'Has anyone else read it?'

'Good Lord, no! As a matter of fact you're the only person who knows about it.'

'Can I read it?'

'Ah well, the truth is it's not really in a readable state. You know what my handwriting's like.'

'Even so I'd like to. Very much.'

'Really?'

Jenny nodded.

'I'll think about it,' said George.

Jenny got up from the floor, stretched across the divan, and took out the tin labelled *Golden Twist*. 'You know there's a great deal more to you than I'd suspected, George,' she said. 'How come you've stuck in Bagshot Road all these years?'

'Pure habit,' said George. 'I've never been one for the rat race.'

'But Bagshot Road...'

'There are plenty worse. McDougall leaves me alone. The kids aren't that bad.'

'But don't you ever want to—well, break out?'

It occurred to George that sitting in the bedroom of a desirable and sympathetic chick at 11.30 at night was as good an example of breaking out as any he could think of. He smiled. 'I won't say it hasn't crossed my mind from time to time.'

'But Agenor's simpler? Is that it?' She licked up a cigarette, twisted the ends and offered it to him.

He shook his head. 'I gave them up last year. Too expensive.'

'Go on,' she urged. 'Try it.'

To refuse would be simply ungracious. 'All right,' he said. 'Thanks. Have you always rolled your own?'

'Only since I went to college. You still haven't answered my question.'

George sighed. 'The fact is I don't really know the answer. I suppose Agenor's my compromise. After all you can't just ditch responsibilities as if they didn't exist.'

'Your family, you mean?'

He nodded.

'Tell me about them.'

'Well, you've met Mike and Katie. Marilyn's doing "A" levels at the Tech.'

Jenny struck a match and held it out to him. He leant forward, touched the end of his cigarette to the flame and sucked. She waited till his was well alight then lit her own. 'And Margery?' she said, waving out the match. 'It is Margery, isn't it?'

George leant back, pillowed his head on his bent arm and took a deep pull at his cigarette. 'Yes,' he said, 'it's Margery.'

There was a longish pause. 'She doesn't *grok*?'

George chuckled. 'This isn't Agenor. More's the pity.'

'You know what I mean.'

'Margery's all right,' said George. 'She's fine. Her only trouble is she worries too much.'

'About you?'

'About everything. The house, her mother, the kids, the

cost of living. You name it, she'll worry about it.'

'And you don't?'

George closed his eyes and then opened them again very wide. He had the odd sensation that the room was looking at him. Must be that bloody eye. Or the cigarette. 'What's that record?' he asked.

'Stephanie Duclos.'

'Oh.'

'You like her?'

'She's great.'

'How's the cigarette?'

'Fine. Made me feel a bit dizzy though. I told you I was out of the habit.' He chuckled. 'But I feel great.'

Neither of them spoke for several minutes. Jenny shifted round so that her shoulders were against the divan on which George was sprawled. She tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Stephanie Duclos sang on about soft spring rain; about falling out of love; about being so alone. George extricated his arm from behind his head and had just lowered his hand to the point where his fingertips were resting against Jenny's cheek when the telephone rang. It startled George so much he dropped his cigarette butt inside his shirt.

Jenny crawled round to the head of the divan and lifted the receiver. 'No,' she said, 'no, I'm not in bed.... What? ... When? ... *Now!* ... (there ensued a long interval during which George succeeded in locating the cigarette butt) ... Well, all right, I suppose so.... I don't know, I haven't got a watch on ... (she placed one hand over the mouthpiece and asked George what time it was. He told her.).... Nearly midnight.... yes.... No, they won't be staying.... O.K. ... See you.'

She replaced the receiver, stubbed out the remains of her cigarette and pushed her fingers deep into the roots of her dark brown hair. The record came to an end and clicked itself off. She looked at George and smiled apologetically. 'Sorry about that,' she said.

George heaved himself up off the divan and brushed the traces of ash off his clothes. 'Maybe it's just as well,' he said. 'I'd have had too much explaining to do.'

Jenny nodded. 'I did think of putting him off, but. . .'

'“But”,’ said George. 'I know.' He grinned. 'That's another good thing about Agenor. They don't have telephones.'

The axial tilt of Chnas is 1.7 degrees. This effectively deprives the planet of any seasons in the terrestrial meaning of the word. In the temperate zone, the climate being both mild and equable, Chnassians invariably sleep in the nude and usually on one of the canopied *grokking* cribs which come in all shapes and sizes. Zil and Orgypp's was woven out of *slyk* tendrils and retained the fragrant aroma of that exotic tropical creeper whose unique *hwyllth* it was to vibrate gently in harmony with those who shared their pleasure with it. If a *grok* was particularly successful the interlaced tendrils of the crib would, by caressing one another, produce a gentle and musical sussuration wholly enchanting to the ear.

When Zil and Orgypp retired to bed shortly after the Counsellor's departure they found their crib emitting a faint and melancholy fluting which, since they were both thoughtful and *in-thrunnged* could owe nothing to any *grok*. 'It's almost as if it's trying to tell us something,' mused Orgypp, stroking the canopy gently with her outstretched hand.

'*Wooh. . . oooh. . . woohoooh*,' sighed the crib, and to Orgypp it sounded as forlorn and woebegone as a breeze in some forgotten Knyffian reedbed, '*oooh . . . ooowhoooo. . .*'

Zil lay on his back and frowned up at the restless canopy. 'I'm convinced it's something to do with Shorge,' he said. 'Somehow I just can't seem to get him out of my mind. I've been thinking about him all evening. Ever since you heard him in the sky-mirror.'

'Since *we* heard him, Zil.'

'But *why* did we, Orgypp?'

'He needs us,' she said simply.

‘Does that mean *we* need *him*?’

In the shadows Orgypp’s dark eyes brimmed with slow tears. ‘He’s ours,’ she whispered. ‘We made him. And now he hungers for *hwyllth*.’

She turned on her side away from Zil, folded her arms across her breast and closed up like a daisy.

‘Ooohooo,’ mourned the crib. ‘oooh ... ooo ... ooowhooo.’

It was a quarter past twelve when George reached home. The light was still on in the hall. Shining through the stained glass panel of the front door it splashed a grotesque psychedelic mixture of carmine, purple and saffron across his face as he scratched around fitting his key into the lock.

He closed the door quietly behind him, clicked up the catch, and then noticed a gleam of light from the kitchen. He tiptoed down the hall and peeped in. Marilyn was sitting at the table munching a piece of buttered toast. Spread open before her was her weekly copy of *Poppet*. A steaming mug of cocoa was beside her left elbow. A transistor radio was softly relaying pop music for Night Owls. She glanced up. ‘Hi, Dad.’

‘Hi,’ he responded. ‘When did you get in?’

‘’Bout ten minutes ago. Keith gave me a lift. ’D you like a piece of toast?’

George suddenly realized that he hadn’t eaten anything worth calling food for over six hours. ‘Yes, all right,’ he said. ‘Thanks.’

Marilyn reached out, peeled a slice of *Wonderloaf* from its wax-wrap pack and slotted it into the toaster. ‘You found your friends all right then?’

George nodded. ‘And what have you been up to? Or shouldn’t I ask?’

‘Nothing special. ’S matter of fact we stayed on in *The Hay Wain* most of the evening. There was a power-cut.’

George glanced across at her. ‘I know,’ he said.

‘They lit the place up with candles. Really spooky. Great!’

'Yes,' he said. 'We looked in again later on. It was pretty crowded, wasn't it?'

'Packed out,' she agreed. 'But ever so friendly. Everyone had something to say for a change.' She surveyed him shrewdly from under a pair of false eyelashes as thick as paintbrushes. 'Mum know you were out?' she enquired with a smile.

'Of course. Why?'

'Just wondered.'

George looked down at the table. Her magazine was open at a feature entitled: '*Your Stars and You.*' He turned it round. '*Aries,*' he read. '*A week of decision during which your restless nature may lead to friction at work and at home. Look before you leap.*' He wondered when Jenny's birthday was. Suddenly he was overwhelmed by an intense longing to be with her again; a yearning hunger for her smiling eyes, her soft mouth, her hair, her gently rocking breasts. At that moment she was infinitely more real in his imagination than she had ever been in fact. He expelled his breath in a long quiet sigh.

Marilyn trowelled butter on to a piece of toast and handed it to him. 'Cheer up, Dad,' she said. 'It may never happen.'

'That's just it,' he said leadenly. 'That's just exactly it.'

She garnered up her mug of cocoa in both hands and sipped it thoughtfully. 'Mum in a mood?' she asked.

George screwed up his lips into a wry grin and shook his head.

'What's up then?'

Not since he had delighted in her as a small, dumpy child with a will of her own had George felt closer to his daughter, and yet he could no more have told her what was troubling him than he could have made love to her. 'Night Owls,' he grunted scornfully. 'Who on earth do you suppose listens to that sort of stuff?'

'Well, us for two,' she said. 'Shall I switch it off?'

'No, leave it. I don't mind.' He tore off a strip of his toast

and chewed it sombrely. Suddenly his face lit up with a grin of reminiscence.

Marilyn smiled. 'That's better. You almost had me worried there for a moment.'

George chuckled. 'I met a really odd character tonight. Someone from the University. Believe it or not he's doing a Ph.D. on pornography.'

'Oh, Wendell Hammerstein.'

'You *know* him?'

'Well-l, hardly. I met him once at the Tech. disco. He thinks he's God's gift to women.'

'And you didn't?'

Marilyn made a noise that might have been considered unladylike in a less uncertain age. 'He yakks too much.'

'Who doesn't?' said George. He stuffed the remains of his toast into his mouth, wiped his greasy fingers on a tea-towel and gave a strand of his daughter's hair an affectionate tug. 'G'night, love. Thanks for the snack.'

'Night, Dad.'

She watched him tiptoe out of the kitchen and heard the faint creaking of the stairs as he climbed up to bed. She half wished she'd told him she'd seen him driving away from *The Hay Wain* with the girl in the sheepskin coat. She felt, without quite knowing why, that he would have been glad to tell her about it. But then again he might not. She shook her head and, pulling *Poppet* towards her, went back to the story she had been reading before he came in. It was called '*No Stranger to Me*' and it was all about love.

Counsellor Sng Rmh stretched out his arm and adjusted the twin flames in his cribside lamp till they shed a steady glow on the page before him. Then he took a sip at the goblet of *brtlbris*, sucked his lips, took a second sip, set down the goblet and turned over the next leaf of *Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage*.

'This Paper which the Urthlings call "gilt",' he read, 'is printed by the government and issued in the form of payment

to all the citizens. Some receive a lot and some receive only a little. Most Urthlings receive only a little because there are more of them. With their gilt they are able to purchase the necessities of life. Those Urthlings who have the most gilt are greatly envied and admired by those who have less, since an Urthling's worth and stature among his fellows is graded according to the amount of gilt he possesses. Shorge earned very little gilt because he was only a teacher and teachers are ranked very low on the scale of Urthling values. Below him were only the nurses of the sick, the artists and writers, and those who were called "public servants". On the very lowest level of all were the social outcasts and those old Urthlings who had worn themselves out in service to the State.'

'Extraordinary,' murmured Sng Rmh. 'His style certainly lacks *hwyllth*, but what an incredible imagination!' The *pr* curled up on the crib beside him assumed that his master was addressing him and gave vent to a dozy rumble which continued for a few moments and then died fitfully away.

Sng Rmh refreshed himself with another sip of liqueur and read on.

Margery was an anonymous hump under the eiderdown as George groped beneath his pillow and drew out his pyjamas. 'You asleep?' he whispered.

The shape whom he had sworn to love and to cherish all his life made no response.

He carried his pyjamas over to the dressing-table, debated whether to risk turning on a light, and decided against it. The lamp at the corner of the street streaked a wan glimmer through the gap in the curtains and across the bedroom ceiling. His spectral image parodied his disrobing in the dressing-table mirror.

He draped his discarded clothes over a chair, padded back to the bed and insinuated himself between the sheets.

'What time is it?' muttered Margery.

'Sorry if I woke you. About half past twelve.'

'Where've you been?'

'Talking.'

'*And drinking.*'

'Well, we had a couple.'

'Who's "we"?'

'Sam, Henry ... you know. The usual crowd.' He rolled over on his side towards her and dipped a tentative hand into the pool of her warmth only to feel her flinch away from the offered contact much as a horse might twitch its flank to discourage a troublesome fly.

'That's funny,' she mumbled.

'Eh?' His surprise was wholly unaffected. 'What's funny?'

'Sam Mostyn rang you up at half past nine.'

George felt as though he was being laced up very tight in an old-fashioned corset. His temperature dropped by about twenty degrees and his heart which an hour earlier had seemed large enough to contain the whole of humanity, shrivelled to the size of a peanut.

'I said Sam rang up at half past nine.'

Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!

'Well, go on, George. I'm listening.'

No, no, no, no, no, no!

Margery turned over on to her back. George closed his eyes tight.

'Well, who is she?'

'Who's who?' He hardly recognized his own voice in that throttled squeak.

'That Jenny Lawlor, isn't it?'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, Marge, what d'you think I—'

'That's just it, George. How do I know *what* to think?'

'All right. So I went to a science-fiction film show at the University. She invited me. Afterwards four of us went on to the pub.'

'Till twelve?'

'Well, of course there was the mad sex orgy, too. I was

forgetting that. We all stripped off and threw raspberry jellies at each other and licked them off. You and I should try it some time.'

'Why did you tell me you were going to the Tech. with Sam Mostyn?'

George sighed. '*I* don't know,' he said. 'Maybe because I knew what you'd say if I'd told you where I *was* going.'

'You really expect me to believe that?'

George was silent.

'As if I hadn't got enough to worry about.'

'Raspberry jelly,' murmured George.

'God alone knows what Sam must be thinking.'

'Trickling all down you; slurp, slurp, gloop, klug...'

'It's bound to be all round the school common room on Monday.'

'In your hair and your ears and up your nose ...'

'Of course Mum *would* have to answer the phone. She guessed at once.'

'All over your tits and slithering into your belly button ...'

'She's always said I'd have to keep my eye on—'

'Lick, lap, lick, lap...'

'George! Don't you *dare*!

—George, you're disgust—

—George, I.... George, you've no.... *George*...!!'

Orgypp moaned quietly and rolled over on to her other side. She was dreaming that she was a purple duskflower and that six huge gloamers were *grokking* with her simultaneously. Their gentle tongues uncurled and sipped her nectar. Her fragrance exhaled itself upon the enchanted moonlit air. '*Ahhhh...*' breathed the ecstatic crib, '*ahhh ... ahhh...*'

'Look, Sylf, bend your leg and put your toe here.'

'Like this?'

'No. Round more.... There.'

'Ooh ... is that nice?'

'Umm ... And for you?'

'Ooh ... *oho* ... *ooh*, *Ptl!*'

'Shush! You'll wake up the *prrs*.'

'I wonder what it's like for a man?'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, it must *feel* different, mustn't it? I mean sort of going *into* someone.'

'Oh, I don't know.'

'Haven't you ever thought about it?'

'Can't say I have, no.'

'I think it would be nice to change round now and again.'

'Well, that's what we're doing now, isn't it?'

'No, I mean, *be* a man.'

'Jenny, has it ever occurred to you that you might be a lesbian?'

'Oh, balls!'

'Well, it was just a thought.'

George lay awake into the small hours. He had a pain in his stomach and almost succeeded in convincing himself it was cancer. The idea alarmed him so much that he switched to a gastric ulcer and from that to simple indigestion. Finally he climbed out of bed, padded through into the bathroom and mixed himself a dose of stomach powder.

He stood with the milky glass in his hand and stared at his reflection in the cabinet mirror. 'You clot,' he muttered. 'What the hell made you do it? It'll be months before she lets you off this hook. Maybe years. Maybe never.' He licked the rim of white from his lips. 'Oh, sod it all, there must be *some* way out! There *must* be.' 'Why must there?' retorted his reflection. 'Give me one good reason. Just one.' 'Agenor?' 'Who do you think you're kidding?' 'Well, Jenny then.' 'And what makes you suppose there's anything there for you?' 'I wonder who that bastard was on the phone? I won-

der what she's doing with him now? Oh Christ, don't you wish it was you?'

Zil was organizing the end-of-session *gryllook*, checking off the names of the class on his register. 'Ynon?' he said. 'Where's Ynon?'

'She's not well, Mr. Bryn.'

'What's the matter with her?'

'She's sick.'

'Who says so?'

'Llylly. She says it's something Ynon ate.'

Zil marked down Ynon as absent and closed up the register. 'Right. Now have you all got your packed lunches?'

A chorus of assent.

'Notebooks and pencils?'

They had.

'Very well. Now listen carefully. I said "*carefully*", Allt! You can't listen carefully if you've got your nose stuck inside your lunch pack, can you? That's better. Now there's to be no wandering off on your own. Is that clearly understood? Astryl isn't Prelon or Sygmn, is it, Allt?'

'No, Mr. Bryn.'

'So don't any of you forget it. I don't want to have to spend my time dragging you out of swamps or persuading a *ghlofr* to regurgitate you. We stick together, keep our eyes and ears open, and remember there's an assignment to be written at the end of it. All right? Any questions?'

'Can I be excused, teacher?'

'We'll *all* go and be excused.'

'But, Mr. Bryn, I—'

'"*All*", I said, and that includes you, Allt. I don't care if you *did* go after breakfast, you can go again. Meet me in the focus hall in five minutes.'

The class scuttled out. Zil opened a drawer in the table before him and slipped the register inside. A pity about Ynon.

She'd been looking forward to the trip to Astryl. He frowned, remembering something. Hadn't Orgypp said that it was Llylly who'd given her those mushrooms? But they'd had them for supper last night. Very nice too. Still, come to think of it, old Sng Rmh had said something about them too, hadn't he? It was probably nothing to do with it but you couldn't deny that some odd things *had* happened since yesterday evening. On an impulse he scribbled a hasty note to Orgypp asking her to pop over to Llylly and find out how Ynon was. He handed it in at the school message office on his way to the focus hall and a black and white *brl* bird was speeding across Vohl Park with the note in its beak almost before Zil had finished arranging his class in their correct *gryllook* formation. Even so, by the time Orgypp had heard the tinkle of the message bell and had collected the note, Zil and his class were on the far side of the galaxy, gazing up at the gossamer rainbows which arched for ever above the mighty Astrylan falls.

Pleading a headache as his excuse to stay in bed till Margery had gone out shopping, George knew he was exiled to the dog-house from the simple fact that no one had brought him up a Saturday morning cup of tea in bed. Marilyn who might have done it in spite of an embargo was still asleep herself. Hunger finally drove him downstairs in his dressing-gown to find Gran sloshing around in the sink. 'Morning, Gran,' he saluted her with a cheeriness he was far from feeling. 'How's the breakfast situation?'

'It's all washed up,' she responded sourly. 'You're late.'

'I'm bloody hungry.'

'And you can watch that language, George Cringe. There's no call for swearing.'

'Ah, get knotted, you old prune,' muttered George under his breath and jerked open the fridge door. Inside he found one small white egg and a solitary rasher of streaky bacon. 'Christ all bloody mighty!' he raged. 'Anyone would think

the country was in the grip of famine! What laid this? A pigeon?’

He pulled the egg from its hole in the rack, laid it on the dresser beside the sorry strip of bacon, then switched on the cooker and reached up for a frying pan. Gran screwed shut the hot tap and heaved a red plastic bucket out of the sink on to the floor. ‘You’ll have to get a move on,’ she said. ‘There’s a ’lectricity cut due at ten.’

George glanced up at the electric wall-clock. The second hand was not moving. He held his palm above the stove ring and his worst fears were confirmed. At that moment there were no words left in his vocabulary adequate to express his feelings.

His mother-in-law dunked a mop in the bucket and began swabbing the lino round his feet. ‘Well, it’s your own fault,’ she said. ‘You should have been down with the rest of us.’

‘Do you *have* to do that now, Gran?’

‘Someone’s got to,’ she retorted. ‘You can’t expect Margery to do everything.’

‘It’s the *now* I’m concerned about, not the who.’

‘Well, seeing as there’s a power cut there’s not much sense in your being in here, is there? It won’t be on again till twelve.’

‘But I’m starving!’

‘Then you’d better have some cornflakes.’

George snatched open the fridge again. ‘Where’s the milk?’

‘How should I know? Oh, it’s Saturday. It doesn’t come till late Saturdays. There’s a tin of powdered in the larder.’

George favoured her with one of those Tennysonian tidal looks, too full for sound and foam. ‘Did you say “powdered”?’ he whispered.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I don’t know what it’s like though. It’s at the back.’

Very carefully George replaced the egg and the slice of bacon in the fridge and closed the door on them. Then he walked steadfastly out of the kitchen into the lounge. From

the sideboard cupboard he collected the half full bottle of whisky and a tumbler. Slowly he remounted the stairs, entered his study and slammed the door shut behind him.

As was his custom Sng Rmh had risen at dawn, donned his exercise suit and trotted off round the perimeter of Vohl Park. He had concluded his perusal of Zil's work some two hours previously and his short sleep had been disturbed by a series of inordinately vivid dreams. In the last of these old Grll Grng had appeared, cackling with laughter and proffering a large basket of spotted mushrooms. For some reason which Sng Rmh found it impossible to recall, this dream had caused him such acute mental disquiet that he had jerked awake and had been considerably relieved to find that the old woman was not in fact standing at his cribside.

The uneasiness the vision had engendered persisted throughout his constitutional. Not even the heart-easing *hwyllth* of a herd of *hoofrs*, seeming to float like a fleet of weird and woolly botes in a sea of milk-white mist beneath a grove of scarlet *droth* trees, could dispel it for more than a moment. By the time the puffing Counsellor had regained the Sanctuary his mind was made up. He took his bath in company with Ptl and Sylf and told them to cancel any appointments he might have made for that day.

'Are you going visiting, Master?' they enquired.

'Indeed I am, my dears. So lay out my travelling suit, would you? And my Privy Counsellor's mantle.'

'Do you wish us to accompany you, Master?'

'No, I think not, my mirrors. I intend my visit to be as informal as possible.'

Ptl and Sylf eyed one another. 'And when can we expect your return, Master?' Ptl asked.

'By supper time, certainly,' said the old man. 'And if all goes well I see no reason why we should not celebrate our reunion with a suitable feast and an evening's *grokking*. Does that meet with your approval?'

Their radiant smiles left him in no doubt that it did.

If one wished to imagine a cosmic antithesis to Chnassian *grokking* it would surely be that deliberate withholding of love as a punishment for transgression which certain terrestrial wives and mothers see fit to inflict upon their unfortunate husbands and children. Margery Cringe was an adept at it. She could carry her resentment around within her like a lump of permafrost for days on end, defying all attempts to thaw it. Her lips, which Nature had designed to be rather full and generous, tightened against her teeth, and her expression became set and wooden. Even her shoulders seemed to narrow as though they were huddling themselves round to brood over her injury. 'I am suffering,' her whole body proclaimed, 'and it's your fault.' Her children who had all at one time or another been the cause of this recognized it instinctively. They called it 'Mum's mood' and accepted it much as city dwellers in the Middle Ages accepted the visitations of the Plague—that is to say as something which was probably a punishment from above and would go away eventually. Until it did they suffered stoically, felt corporately guilty, and lost no opportunity to get out of range.

Margery's mood as she trundled her trolley round the local supermarket this Saturday morning was a classic and it was undoubtedly exacerbated by the fact that George had, as she expressed it bitterly to herself, 'caught her unawares' the previous night. By this she meant that he had succeeded in tapping that vein of primitive sensuality within her which was both the source of her profoundest shame and some of his own happiest memories. Well, she'd make him pay for it all right. He wouldn't get there again, not for a month, not if he went down on his knees and begged for it. Just let him try, that's all. Just let him try!

As this unspoken challenge framed itself inaudibly round her vocal chords she happened to find herself confronted by a shelf of full-flavoured fruit jellies, among which raspberry

was predominant. For a second or two the frozen expression on her face melted and was replaced by something so utterly different that she looked at least ten years younger. Her hand reached out, grasped a packet and then, with a shudder, she thrust it back.

'Oh go on, Mum. Why not?' urged Katie.

'It's too expensive.'

'Dad would if he was here.'

Margery's lips tightened visibly. She glanced down at her shopping list. 'We need a new bottle of vinegar, Katie. They've got some on offer. And, Mike, you can get some bleach.'

Her children felt the frost in their mother's voice and shrivelled inwardly.

Rare indeed is the household on Chnas that does not employ at least one pair of *rortls*. These friendly little creatures adore housework and are never happier than when they are bustling round with a duster or polishing the silver. In appearance they have a superficial resemblance to large Koala bears. Their worst faults are a tendency to boss their households around and a distaste for innovation. However, since so much of the domestic routine on Chnas is hallowed by ritual, these could almost be construed as virtues.

One of them opened the door to Orgypp and straightaway apologized for Llylly who, it said, was attending to Ynon. 'Poor little mite,' it added parenthetically. 'Such a shame. And her so looking forward to her trip to Astryl.'

'Yes, I heard she'd been sick,' said Orgypp. 'I do hope it's nothing serious.'

'They were up with her all night,' said the *rortl*, taking Orgypp's cape and ushering the visitor into the lounge. 'It seems like she was seeing things that weren't there. But here comes the Mistress, now.' And with that it twitched its nose and bustled off.

'Hello, Orgy,' said Llylly. 'It's sweet of you to pop over.'

The two friends pressed palms and touched foreheads.

'How is she, Ll?'

'Much better, thank *oho*. But did we have a night!' Llylly subsided on to the couch and blew out her cheeks in a profound sigh of relief.

'Bo said something about her *seeing* things.'

'*Not* seeing things is more like it, Orgy.'

'Go on!'

'Well, she couldn't see *us* for a start.'

'You don't mean it!'

'She could *hear* us well enough and when she shut her eyes it was all right. But when she opened them we weren't there. She said she was somewhere else.'

'Somewhere *else*?'

'It really was extraordinarily weird. Frd thought she was in some crazy sort of *gryllook*. Only she was still here.'

'Did you call the doctor?'

Llylly nodded. 'Frankly, Orgy, I think old Goink is getting past it. The first thing he did was make us both kneel down and chuckle with him. Then he put a blindfold on Ynon and prescribed a posset.'

'Still it does seem to have worked.'

'Frd thinks she'd have got over it anyway, and I must say I'm inclined to agree.'

'Did Goink say what he thought had caused it?'

'Those mushrooms.'

'Is that what you think?'

'It's possible I suppose. According to Goink there have been one or two cases. But Frd and I had them too and we were perfectly all right. Well, *you* had them, didn't you?'

'Yes,' said Orgypp. 'They were delicious.'

'Well, there you are then.'

Orgypp wondered whether to tell her friend about her own odd experiences of the previous evening and finally decided against it. 'Is Ynon awake now?' she asked.

'Oh, yes. Sitting up in her crib as chirpy as a *tkkl*. Why don't you go on up and see her? I'll get Bo to brew us a *lakh*.'

Orgypp found Ynon exactly as Llylly had described her. She was sitting cross-legged in her crib bent over a drawing book in which she was colouring industriously. 'Hello, Orgypp,' she smiled. 'Come and see what I've done.'

Orgypp leant down and touched foreheads. 'Great *oho*!' she exclaimed irreverently. 'What's that?'

'That's it,' explained Ynon. 'Where I was.'

Orgypp looked from the drawing to Ynon and back again. 'But what *is* it?' she said. 'What *are* all those things?'

'I don't know,' said Ynon. 'I thought perhaps you might.'

Orgypp gave a sudden violent shudder. 'Yes,' she whispered, 'I *do* know what they are, Ynon. They're called *kars*.'

'"*Kars*"? Are they animals?'

Orgypp shook her head. 'They're for people to ride in,' she murmured. 'Zil invented them for Shorge's Urth.'

'I *thought* those were people in them,' said Ynon. 'But I couldn't be sure.'

Despite the contentions of his wife and her mother George was by no means a hardened drinker, though he sometimes thought he might have been if only the stuff were less expensive. He liked the way it padded off the sharper edges of reality.

Standing before the window of his study, dimly aware of his unshaven image in the grubby pane, he waited for the magic to work. 'A womb with a view,' he thought. 'That's what you need, boyo. Someone warm and snug for you to curl up inside and hibernate. And what have you got? Well, not *that* certainly.'

He swallowed another mouthful of spirits and pondered darkly on his fate. The trouble was he was married to *two* women, and one was always out to clobber the other. Why couldn't she just accept that sex was meant to be enjoyed and simply let things be? Why did he have to be labelled a dis-

gusting pervert into the bargain? What the hell was she so *afraid* of? 'Women!' he groaned aloud. 'Bloody *women*! Why in God's name can't they just let themselves *be* women?'

He shambled over to his desk and lowered himself into the chair. His notebook lay open at that still uncompleted sentence. He read through the paragraph and remembered how much he had been looking forward to writing about those mushrooms all through that interminable 3C double Science yesterday morning. And now it had all gone sour on him. Funny that. Agenor was the one corner of his life that existed independently of Margery and yet somehow she could still creep in and put the mockers on it. Strange.

He fingered his stubbled chin, scratched his scalp, and then examined his fingernails critically. 'Come on, Cringe,' he told himself. 'Pull yourself together or she'll knock you out in the first round.' So saying he unscrewed the top of the bottle, poured what was left in his glass back into it, and then shuffled his way across the landing and into the bathroom.

Each Chnassian Counsellor is required to put in a regular annual stint at the Guidance Council. This is to ensure that there is always a quorum of twelve in attendance with the consequent authority to summon a Plenary Session should the need arise. Protocol demands also that the quorum should be composed of equal proportions of the Chnassian sexes. Interlocked, out-*thrunng* with in-*thrunng*, none dominant, all chuckling in perfect harmony, the *grokking* circle achieves a practical and symbolic unity that is both the quintessence of its ancient culture and a veritable paradigm of *oho*.

Sng Rmh arrived at the Council Chamber to find his peers considering a report which had just come in from the Cryth district of Knyff. A hitherto unknown sub-species of fungus had appeared almost overnight in enormous numbers throughout the littoral marshlands. Bright yellow in colour and distinguished by a liberal speckling of sky-blue spots they

had initially been assumed to be some form of genetic cross between the popular edible, saffron *frtl* and the purple *celestis*—a mushroom whose medicinal properties had long been appreciated throughout Chnas. Experimental tests having appeared to confirm the essentially benign character of the fungus, it had been gathered and consumed in considerable quantities by the local inhabitants. And there the matter might have rested, with due thanks being rendered to *oho* for a welcome addition to culinary *hwyllth*, had not certain odd side-effects begun to manifest themselves among those consumers below *grocking* age. As yet no clearly discernible pattern had been established, but some indication of the general nature of the effect could perhaps be indicated by pointing out that among the children themselves it was apparently becoming known as 'glass-gryllook'. The report ended with a request that the Guidance Council would deliver an opinion on the phenomenon.

Drg Myff, the Speaker for the month, canvassed the views of those Counsellors present and elicited a little further hearsay information on the nature of 'glass-gryllook.' It was then decided that a 'General Proclamation of Advice' should be published without delay, cautioning parents against allowing their offspring to sample the fungus until the true nature of its short and long term effects had been studied in greater detail.

One or two matters arising out of the previous session were summarily dealt with and then Drg Myff put the formal question: 'Is there any further business for this Session?'

Sng Rmh coughed and rose to his feet. 'If I might beg the Council's forbearance,' he said.

Drg Myff smiled. 'You have it, Sng Rmh, old friend. And what is it brings you hot-foot from Vohl Park?'

'A matter of considerable urgency, Mister Speaker. Of that I can assure you.'

'Then say on, Counsellor. I promise you our undivided attention.'

Sng Rmh held up the script of Zil's story and explained briefly how it had come into his possession. He then described his reading of the *rhns* and the unprecedented phenomena which had accompanied the ritual. 'Now, with your permission, Mister Speaker, I intend to quote to the Council certain selected passages from this remarkable work, for I am firmly convinced that it is, in some extraordinary fashion, not unconnected with the phenomena I have just described.'

The members of the Council nodded their accord. Indeed, Sng Rmh's strange story was far and away the most absorbing item of Council business any of them had heard in donkey's years. Drg Myff signalled to him to proceed, whereupon Sng Rmh delivered himself of a short introduction, quoting Zil's title and sub-title, then launched into the chapter devoted to the social customs of the Planet Urth. Before he had completed the first page the whole Council was bubbling with delight. It began with a snigger, developed into a suppressed chortle, and finally exploded into an uncontrollable *ohoian* exultation so profound that the venerable members were clutching hold of each other and weeping for sheer lunatic joy.

When he reached the section on religious wars even Sng Rmh was forced to pause and wipe his streaming eyes. The idea was so sublimely idiotic that none but *oho* could have inspired it. And to think that mild little Zil Bryn of all people should have dreamt up so fantastic a concept! Unbelievable!

Drg Myff motioned him to desist and gestured to where one of the Counsellors had slipped from her chair and was rolling around on the floor, her rigid *thrunngs* twitching spasmodically as they *grokked* the quaking air. Two attendant *rortls* scuttled forward and assisted her back into her place. '*Lakh,*' wheezed the Speaker. 'In *oho's* name bring us all *lakh!*'

The pause which ensued restored some much needed sense of perspective to the proceedings. Sipping at their bowls of

lakh the Counsellors were even able to discuss tentatively the nature of their experience. One and all were agreed that *Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage* was a work of true comic genius in which the hand of *oho* was everywhere apparent. After all, who but *oho* himself could have conceived a world in which every sane value was stood on its head until the bemused inhabitants destroyed one another in the name of *grok*, while at the same time *grokking* itself was synonymous with sin? Genius. Pure genius.

But was that genius sufficient to account for the mysterious behaviour of the *rhns*? Sng Rmh wondered. Could it fulfil the stipulations in Jhn Nwt's *Divination* for a jest so magnificently preposterous that 'is' would become 'is-not' and 'is-not' 'is'? What did the Council think?

The Council thought, after due reflection, that it would need to question Zil Bryn himself before it could pronounce upon the matter. Sng Rmh was accordingly instructed to request the author to attend the full Plenary Session which would be summoned without delay. In the meantime those Counsellors who felt equal to it might do worse than to indulge themselves with a further sampling of the exquisite lunacies of the Planet Urth.

The high spot of every end-of-session *gryllook* was undoubtedly the visit to the underwater city of the Drypidons. Since the surface of Astryl was composed largely of water it was only to be expected that *oho* in his infinite humour would have created a race of beings specifically to enhance the *hwyllth* of such a medium. This he had achieved triumphantly in the Drypidons. In appearance they bore a close resemblance to terrestrial dolphins, though the largest of them never exceeded a length of two metres from nose to tail and the average was around one and a half metres. They had a fluke like a dolphin's, a dorsal fin like a dolphin's, and that sublimely *ohoian* grin which is the dolphin's own peculiar contribution to terrestrial *hwyllth*. But there the resem-

blance ended, for each Drypidon carried concealed within its streamlined flanks a pair of retractable wing fins which allowed it to take to the air and cavort at will above the ever rolling waters that girdled its planet.

Of all the life forms which the Chnassians had encountered in their exploration of their galaxy the Drypidons alone had given them cause to feel humble. They recognized in them the absolute embodiment of *hwyllth*. It was seemingly impossible for any Drypidon to execute a movement that was not the epitome of grace, or to emit a sound that was not harmonious. Their chosen mode of self-expression was the dance, though that word is wholly inadequate to convey the sublime complexity of an art form which had taken millennia to perfect and for which the whole of Astryl's biosphere was the stage. During these performances the Drypidons communicated both vocally and telepathically and a major dance festival often lasted for years on end.

These endearing creatures had no enemies. Their diet consisted of plankton and seaweeds, and though they too had, long ago, discovered the technique of *gryllook*, unlike the Chnassians, they hardly ever practised it. They welcomed the Chnassians to their planet with a kind of amused tolerance and did their best to make them feel at home. To further this end they had constructed a large transparent aquadome in the centre of the Astrylian ocean. The summit of this dome projected well above the water and was equipped with a *gryllook* beacon and focus platform to aid *hwoming*.

Zil shepherded his class on to the dome and, as the weather was warm and sunny, permitted them to remove their clothes and join the Drypidons in the water. He himself descended the spiralled slope to chat with the Drypidon who was responsible for the welfare of visitors. Zil was pretty sure they had met several times before but it was difficult to be certain since, to a Chnassian, all Drypidons looked much alike, and such information as was tendered to one of them was

transferred telepathically to the others and held in common by them all. He offered a *thrunng* to the Drypidon's blow-hole and they *grokked* formally.

'We can see you're one short today,' communicated the Drypidon in silent and perfectly phrased Chnassian. 'Ynon, isn't it?'

Zil agreed that it was. He guessed that the Drypidon had gathered this information from the rest of the class either extra-sensorially or by simple eavesdropping.

'Nothing serious, we hope?'

Zil explained as best he could what he supposed to be the reason for Ynon's absence.

The Drypidon clucked sympathetically. 'We know it's none of our business,' it said, 'but we're wondering if you've considered the possibility of an overlap?'

'Eh?' said Zil, who was not paying very close attention. 'I beg your pardon, I didn't quite...'

'The impingement of an asomatic continuum,' murmured the Drypidon, 'due to a biaxial juxtaposition of one or more enantiomorphic compatibles.'

'Oh,' said Zil.

'We only wondered,' said the Drypidon, 'because, if it is, we believe that you may find yourselves in considerable difficulties.'

'You mean...?' prompted Zil.

'Indeed we do,' affirmed the Drypidon. 'After all that's why we dropped *gryllook*.'

'Really?' said Zil. 'I didn't know that.'

'It would have been just about the time when you Chnassians first discovered it,' mused the Drypidon. 'We only mention it in case it might be of help.'

'I'm extremely grateful to you,' said Zil, 'though to be perfectly candid I'm not absolutely sure that I understand how...'

'Well, it won't last long anyway,' said the Drypidon. 'We

can assure you of that. But while it does—if it does—our advice would be to go easy on the *gryllook*. Just in case, you understand.'

Zil nodded.

'We lost six and a half hundred thousand in one go,' said the Drypidon.

'Six and a half hundred thousand!'

'Ah yes. But remember we're not individuals like you Chnassians. It was all one to us.'

'But where did they go to?'

'We never discovered. Strange to think there's almost certainly another Astryl floating around somewhere. Or another Chnas for that matter.'

'Another Chnas!'

'Or something very like it.'

'Urth,' murmured Zil.

'Who knows?' said the Drypidon who had, of course, availed himself of Zil's mental concept almost before Zil had expressed it. 'We don't see why not.'

'And Shorge?'

'Ah,' said the Drypidon, 'there, I'm afraid, you have us. Remember, none of us ever came back to tell the rest of us what we'd found. But we suppose it's just possible he *might* be your personal enantiomorph.'

'Great *oho*,' whispered Zil. 'And I've got to *gryllook* this lot *hwom* before sundown!'

'Rather you than us, friend,' said the Drypidon sympathetically.

'Oh yes,' sniffed Gran, 'he's been *down*. Made a rare old song and dance too. As if it was *my* fault they went and cut the 'lectricity.'

'And Marilyn?' asked Margery.

Gran sniffed again and raised her eyes to the ceiling.

Mike tottered in with a large cardboard box of groceries which he dumped on the table beside the shopping baskets.

'I'm going down Terry's now, Mum,' he announced. 'See you.'

'You be sure you're back here by half past one!'

The front door banged shut behind him. Katie had already sought sanctuary in her Saturday morning dancing class.

Margery unbuttoned her coat and hung it behind the kitchen door. 'Bacon's up again,' she sighed. 'So's tomatoes.'

'And what's all this then?' demanded Gran suspiciously. She had been unloading one of the baskets on to the table and was now peering into a paper bag.

Margery glanced round and coloured faintly. 'Oh that,' she said. 'There was a sale at Kellman's.'

'Oh ah,' nodded Gran. 'Bit fancy, isn't it?'

'Well, it's not for you, Mum.'

'You want to watch out, Marge,' said the old woman. 'You don't want to go giving him more ideas than what he's got already.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Margery. 'Give it here. I'll take it upstairs.'

She collected the vacuum cleaner from the cupboard under the stairs and carried it up to the bedroom. As she passed Marilyn's room she tried the handle, found the door was locked and called out: 'Are you going to lie there all day?'

There was no reply. Margery's nose sharpened perceptibly. She moved on down the landing and thrust open the door to her own bedroom. George was sitting before the dressing table snipping at his moustache with a pair of cuticle scissors. 'Hello!' he said. 'When did you get back?'

Margery dumped the cleaner on the floor, whipped the coiled cable free and stabbed the plug into the socket.

George sighed inaudibly. 'Ah, come on, love,' he said. 'I've said I'm sorry, haven't I? What do you *want* me to say?'

Marge stamped her toe down on the switch, but the power was still off and the cleaner failed to respond. George suspected that this was being chalked up to him as well. He tried once more. 'Shall I give you a hand to make the bed?'

'I can do it.'

'I know you can,' he said. 'I'm just offering to help.'

'Oh, just keep out of my way.'

George shook his head slowly. 'I remember a day,' he said thoughtfully, 'oh, it must be close on three years ago now, when you looked really cheerful. That time I won twenty-five quid on the Premium Bonds and we all went over to Arundel Park. Do you remember that?'

Margery pounded the pillows as if she hated them. She said not a word.

'So take last night,' he continued. 'In that very bed. It was great, wasn't it? Yet look at you now.'

'Oh, leave me alone,' she muttered.

'So what *do* you want?' he persisted. 'Maybe if I knew I could do something about it.'

She straightened up then and looked at him directly for the first time since she'd come into the room. 'Can't you understand?' she whispered lethally. 'I just don't want to *see* you, that's all. Just go away. Leave me alone.'

George stared at her. 'For Christ's sake, Marge!' he pleaded. 'What have I *done*?'

The question was unanswerable and Margery did not attempt to answer it. She stooped over the bed and thrust home the trailing ends of the sheets till the covers were as tight and hard as a coffin lid. Then she drew up the counterpane like a shroud and twitched it smooth.

'O.K.' said George. 'If you're sure that's the way you want it.' He walked over to the door, half-turned as if to make some further observation, then seemingly thought better of it and went out.

Margery waited till she heard his feet on the stairs then walked over to the dressing-table and straightened up the brushes and combs. That done she closed the bedroom door, picked up the paper bag from the chair, opened it and drew out a black lace nightdress. She shook it out, held it against herself and eyed her image in the mirror. As she did so,

with a sudden derisive howl the vacuum cleaner started up. The power cut had ended.

The car was standing outside the house where Margery had left it. George climbed in, started the engine and drove towards the town centre. He had no particular destination in mind though at that moment any uninhabited island in the South Pacific seemed to offer substantial attractions. A temporary traffic hold-up in the High Street confronted him with an enormous hoarding advertising pork sausages. He was reminded all over again that he still had not eaten. While he was contemplating the poster there was an urgent rapping at the side window and a familiar face peered in at him.

George wound down the window. 'Oh, hello, Wendell.'

'Hi, man! How's about a lift down town?'

'Sure. Hop in.'

Wendell climbed into the mini and folded his knees like a grasshopper. The traffic moved forward again. 'Where are you headed?' George asked.

'Where it's all happening, man,' Wendell informed him.

'Where all what's happening?'

'The con. At *The Mitre*. Jenny didn't tell you?'

'No,' said George. 'I don't think so.'

Wendell unclipped a battered brief case and pulled out a sheet of cyclostyled foolscap. 'It's all there, man,' he said. 'Boomer's chairing it. Public Brains Trust from seven on. 50p for non mems.'

'It sounds interesting,' said George. 'Do you know if Jenny's going?'

'Bound to be,' said Wendell folding the programme in two and clipping it into the dashboard ashtray. 'She's got a thing going for Boomer.'

'Oh,' said George, deciding there and then that Philip Boomer was a person whom he was going to find it difficult to love. 'Serious?'

'Last I heard, man, they were lacing it up like old boots.'

The expression was new to George but even so he did not feel it necessary to ask for an explanation. 'And who else is going to be there?' he enquired.

'Bill Tabard and Sylvia Kirt for sure,' said Wendell. 'Pete Lampe's a probable. Madge and Rog Flyte are maybes.'

'Are you organizing it?'

'I liaise,' said Wendell.

'Who between?'

'Town and gown, man. What else?'

George drove down to the esplanade, along the seafront and pulled up outside *The Mitre*—an enormous Victorian rock-cake of a building which was always rumoured to be teetering on the brink of bankruptcy but somehow never quite pitched over into the abyss. Wendell unfolded himself and climbed out, his knee joints cracking like dead twigs. 'A Christian act that, Cringe. I'm mightily beholden.'

'You're welcome,' said George.

Wendell grinned, blinked, and stalked lankily up the steps to vanish through one of the revolving doors of the hotel.

George leant across the vacant passenger seat and clicked down the door catch. Then he rested both his hands on the steering wheel and gazed dispiritedly out to sea. The breeze was blowing off the shore, flattening the in-coming waves so that they flopped almost apologetically upon the shingle, each one depositing an identical little damp curl of yellowish foam. Half way to the horizon a forlorn huddle of fishing boats bobbed like commas. The sky was the colour of ashes. George let out his breath with a sound like the wind sighing through telephone wires on a wet night. *Let me out! Let me out! Let me out!*

'Fraid you can't park here, sir.'

'Eh? Oh, I'm just going.'

He nodded to the traffic warden, let in the clutch, and drove off in search of food.

The uneasiness which had been hovering above Orgypp

like an ill-omened *trll* ever since she had talked to Ynon that morning, intensified until it seemed to overshadow her completely as she entered the complex of school buildings and made her way towards the focus hall. She carried with her, rolled into a scroll, the three pictures which she had borrowed from Ynon and which she intended to show to Zil the moment he appeared.

She joined the group of miscellaneous parents and *rortls* who had come to collect the children and chatted with them in a desultory way until the soft mutter of a gong warned them that a *gryllook* was imminent. As the last vibrations whispered away into silence they all heard the ineffably sweet, high-pitched trilling note that was the immediate prelude to a transcendental translation. In a matter of seconds it had risen above the threshold of audibility and, a moment later, the circular arena of the hall was filled with laughing, chattering children. But of Zil there was no sign.

The children skipped and shuffled around waiting for their teacher to dismiss them until it gradually dawned on them that he was not there. They peered round doubtfully, whispering self-consciously among themselves, and it was left to Orgypp to push her way forward and ask where Zil was. None of them knew.

'But he must have been with you,' Orgypp insisted. 'He couldn't let you *hwom* by yourselves.'

'He *was* with us,' Allt piped up. 'He counted us down.'

'Yes, yes! He did! He did!' chorused the others.

'Then where is he now?'

They shook their heads. All they could tell her was that a minute ago they had been standing with Zil Bryn on the top of the Astrylian aquadome waving goodbye to the Drypidons. Then Zil had counted them down for *hwom*. And now they were. And he wasn't. They shuffled uncomfortably and one or two of them began to sniffle.

Orgypp bit her lip. 'Oh, he'll *hwom* in a minute,' she said. 'There's nothing for you to worry about. Off you go now.'

Class dismissed.' And she shooed them out of the arena.

She was still standing there pondering long after the building had emptied. At last, her mind made up, she murmured a prayer to *oho*, walked out into the centre of the arena and gazed up steadfastly at the mirrored dome. A thousand tiny Orgypps stared down at her. She moved a few inches to one side until the images were all more or less identical; rolled her eyes upwards; drew in her breath till she could draw it in no more; counted slowly up to ten; exhaled profoundly; *inthrunged*; and slid into the graceful *gryllook* ritual that she had not practised since she too had been a pupil at junior school.

Till came the remembered, dizzying sense of ... backwards slipping through ... *oho* the fingers of ... of ... falling....

flng flg fl ..

... oh o ho

!o!

...oh ... ohsosoftlap lop-logging of wavelets through the rush-hush-hushing of green waterswirling into eyelight twilight all mauve gold barred and—

'Greetings, lone evening traveller,' murmured a hovering Drypidon courteously.

Orgypp sighed the sea deep sigh a child sighs long after a tempest of grief has blown itself out. 'I thought I might have forgotten how to,' she whispered.

'How to?'

'*Gryllook*,' Orgypp explained then, remembering herself, belatedly proffered her *thrunng*.

The Drypidon sensing her deeply troubled spirit, *grokked* her peace. 'We feared this might happen,' it said. 'It is Orgypp, isn't it?'

'Oh, then you must know where Zil is!'

'No,' confessed the Drypidon sadly, 'nor even *if* he is.'

Orgypp's eyes widened into startled sky-mirrors. "'If he is'?" she repeated. 'What does that mean?'

The Drypidon told her about 'overlap'. It meant even less to her than it had to Zil.

Standing there beside the *hwoming* beacon on the roof of the aquadome she gazed out past the shimmering wings of the amiable Drypidon to where in unimaginable splendour the Astrylian sun was setting at the end of a sea-laid carpet of liquid flame. High overhead myriads of Drypidons twinkled like diamond sparks as they soared and swooped in the intricate manoeuvres of their eternal ballet. To Orgypp the *hwyllth* of the scene was like some exquisite pain which seemed to draw the very soul out of her body. For a timeless moment she forgot who she was, and where she was, and why she was there. For all she knew everything in her life had been but the prelude to this instant of revelation when the curtain was drawn aside and she was allowed to glimpse the infinite wonder of *oho* and to mirror it in her own eyes.

The sun's disc slipped down behind the rim of the world; the sea carpet was rolled up; and the dancing stars were transformed one by one into golden fireflies, then into ruby sparks, and finally were snuffed out in the gathering shadows.

Orgypp turned back to the Drypidon only to find it had vanished. She was alone on the dome. But dimly in the dusky waters she thought she could discern ring upon ring of slender shadows rippling ever outwards till they were lost in the outer darkness. As she stared at them in bemused wonder she became aware of a murmurous rustling in the air above her. Glancing up she saw that too was filled with the dark shapes of hundreds and hundreds of hovering Drypidons. She felt no sense of fear or threat even when her hair and cape were fluttered in the downdraught of approaching wing-fins and one of the Drypidons drifted down and offered its blow hole to her *thrunng*. She *grokked* with a sense of deep, overwhelming gratitude, and, as she did so, the night air all around was filled with a gentle, crooning song of comfort.

'You share your *hwyllth* with us, Orgypp,' murmured the Drypidon.

'My *hwyllth*?' echoed Orgypp, genuinely mystified. 'But it was *yours*!'

'True *hwyllth* lies in the eye of the beholder. It is a gathering together in a single consciousness. A focusing and a transmitting. All art requires its spectator: great art requires the great spectator. Therefore we are eternally in your debt, Orgypp.'

'And I in yours,' whispered Orgypp. 'Praise be to *oho*.'

'*Oho* is your awareness of infinite possibility,' returned the Drypidon.

'*Oho* is....' Orgypp paused. '*Oho* is *oho*,' she offered helplessly.

How it happened Orgypp never knew but in some way the Drypidons absorbed her inexpressible concept and translated it into a song of such pure and joyous laughter that she so forgot herself as to fling her arms around the nose of the Drypidon and to hug it in an ecstasy of happiness. It was a rare moment of perfect *ohoian* perception when all *was*; nothing mattered; and being was everything.

At 2.45 p.m. the television screen in the saloon bar of the pub in which George was sitting suddenly flickered and announced both visually and audibly that the Prime Minister was about to make an important announcement on all channels. The assembled clientele, deprived of their prelude to the 3.00 race at Fontwell Park, showed their disapproval by boos and groans, whereupon the barman, with practised deference, reached up and turned off the sound.

George collected another whisky and soda for himself, resumed his seat and stared up somewhat glassily at the screen which was now filled with the silently quacking features of the Rt. Hon. Commander-in-Chief of Her Majesty's Government. Within a matter of moments George found he was chuckling quite uncontrollably. There was something so supremely ridiculous about the man. Deprived of their supporting verbal pomposities, those desperately sincere frowns

and nods which had been rehearsed for hours before the looking glasses of 10 Downing Street, were simply hilarious. In no time at all the whole saloon bar was a tossing tempest of ribald laughter. Other customers came crowding in from adjoining bars to see what the joke was and became instantly infected with the hysteria. Each twitch of an eyebrow, each wobble of a jowl produced its own fresh howl of satirical mirth, and when the Prime Minister finally went so far as to wag an admonishing finger at the camera one man actually doubled up with the stitch. 'Oh Christ,' he wheezed, 'and to think that I voted for 'im last time! What's 'e made of? Plastic?'

'He's right!' cried another voice. 'It's not a real man. It's a dummy.'

'It's Eric Morecambe!'

'Donald Duck, more like!'

'The fing from Outer Space!'

'It's a bloody shame!'

'Pore ole bugger!'

'Poor old us!'

George fumbled for his handkerchief and wiped his streaming eyes. It struck him most poignantly at that moment that the world he inhabited was either a gigantic confidence trick or that everyone in it was simply insane. The reflection sent him off into yet another fit of hysterical giggling. By the time it had passed, normality, in the form of the Paddock at Fontwell Park, had been restored to the screen. But now even this appeared to George as almost equally absurd. Teeny little midgets in weeny little boots scrambling up on to the backs of huge steaming animals while other grim-faced men stood round sheltering under umbrellas and the rain poured down on everyone like the Niagara Falls. He glanced round at his fellows and realized that they did not share his vision. Yet he could not rid himself of it. He bought himself yet another drink and a packet of potato crisps and peered around for some face he could communicate with, for some-

one who looked as though they might understand what he was talking about. There was no one. And yet a few minutes ago these same people had rocked with laughter at the image of their democratically elected leader presumably appealing to them in the name of the Country, in the name of Sanity, in the name—for all George knew—of Civilization. Don't Let's Rock the Boat, he would have said, Prosperity lies Just Around the Corner. It's All Yours for the Taking if only You'll Give Your Government the Support we Need. Ours is a Great Democracy—a Proud Democracy—in which we are all Equal Shareholders. Therefore I Appeal to You as Englishmen—and Women—as Europeans—as... 'As idiots like me,' muttered George delving down into his packet of crisps.

'Beg pardon, sir?' said the barman.

'Why don't they give you salt in these things any more?' demanded George. 'I remember when I was a kid there used to be a little packet inside—all twisted up. Blue it was. Blue paper. Waxed.'

'Those are ready salted, sir. There's unsalted if you'd prefer them.'

George shook his head. 'I just liked finding the little packet and untwisting it and shaking the salt on myself.'

The barman grinned. 'Perhaps you'd care for some more, sir. There's a cellar here.'

George crunched a crisp moodily and declined the offer. The barman moved away to attend to another customer. On the television screen two teams of Neanderthals were now lumbering around like animated tree-trunks in the pouring rain, chasing an oblong ball and clubbing one another into the mud with undisguised savagery. To George their activity seemed scarcely more meaningful than the Prime Minister's silent harangue.

He glanced at his watch and saw that the time was ten past three. He supposed he ought to ring up Margery and let her know where he was, but the mere thought of her cold rejec-

tion was like touching an exposed nerve and he winced from it. One by one he ran through the list of his friends and realized that there was not one among them who could ease the weight which was lying upon his soul, the burden of being who he was, of being himself, of simply being at all. 'Come on. Snap out of it, old man,' they'd say and would then proceed to regale him with a recital of their own worries to make him feel better. They were all like rats stuck in some diabolical behaviourist's maze, trying to pretend that the maze didn't really exist while they sat around busily grooming one another's whiskers and secretly gnawing themselves to death. The mental image was so unpleasant that he tried to rinse it away with a gulp of whisky. When that failed he climbed off the bar-stool and made his way out to the 'Gents'.

To get there he had to cross a small, paved back yard which was stacked with empty beer crates and overflowing dustbins. The urinal itself was surprisingly clean. He planted himself before one of the gleaming stalls and squinted at the pencilled *graffiti*. Among the phone numbers and the cheerful homespun obscenities his wandering eye picked out the name 'Jenny'. There was no accompanying promise of fulfilment or warning of contagion. Just the name itself. Take it or leave it. George glanced down, shook himself, wriggled, and tugged up his zip. 'And why not?' he muttered defiantly.

Like security, *gryllook* is a state of mind. It is also a mode of perception and, as such, it has many cosmic forms. Among ourselves the only form that it is permitted to take is that of the dream. We call our dreams 'illusions' and say they are not 'real'. This is because we have committed ourselves to a particularly exclusive mode of perception. Indeed, there still exist a few terrestrial tribes who recognize and accept their dreams as the other face of reality. We call such people 'primitive'. We regard them as simple-minded and credulous. We tell them that they are deceiving themselves. And whenever it is to our material advantage to do so, we set about

re-educating them. This we call 'progress'. It consists in systematically destroying their ancient mode of perception and replacing it with our own. By so doing we effectively destroy them. At the same time we also destroy ourselves.

When Zil Bryn *gryllooked* from the aquadome on Astryl he assumed, despite the Drypidon's warning, that he would *hwom* safely in Vohl Park. His misplaced confidence was, in part, due to the fact that he had understood scarcely a word of the creature's metaphysical explanation of the phenomenon it called 'overlap', but even more to the fact that in spite of all Sng Rmh had told him, he still could not conceive how such a place as Urth might have material existence. *Imaginative* reality, granted—after all had not he, Zil Bryn, created it?—but that it could exist as Chnas existed in some—what had the Drypidon called it? 'asomatic continuum'?—no, really, that was too much. Which merely goes to show that the Chnassian mode of perception, though in so many respects superior to our own, is still somewhat less than totally comprehensive.

Zil *hwomed* in the middle of the Corporation flowerbed that occupied the precise geometric centre of Beaufort Gardens. His advent was not accompanied by any untoward physical disturbance. In fact, in the terrestrial sense, he was simply not there at all. The only sentient creatures to react to his presence were two dogs who were *grokking* on the gravel path which surrounded the flowerbed. At the instant Zil arrived they sensed him and fled, yelping with fright. In doing so they put to flight a score of starlings, two of whom took refuge in a nearby tree. In getting there one passed straight through Zil's chest and the other through his head.

As the birds came at him Zil instinctively ducked and closed his eyes. The instant he did so he heard, very faint but astonishingly clear, as though it had somehow been miniaturized, Orgypp's voice demanding: 'Where is Zil?'

'Orgypp!' he shouted. 'Orgypp I'm here!'

‘But he must have been with you,’ he heard her say. ‘He couldn’t let you *hwom* by yourselves.’

‘*Orgypp! Orgypp!*’ he bawled desperately.

Ignorant, infinitely remote, the tiny insect voices chirruped on catechizing his absence. Twice more he tried to attract their attention, totally without success. By the time Orgypp had dismissed his class, Zil realized that what the Drypidon had foretold might happen had indeed come to pass. Somehow he had *gryllooked* himself not only right out of Chnas but also out of Chnassian existence! Or had he? He looked down at his hands and then at the rest of his body and it was all quite as real to him as it had ever been. He bent down and touched the surface of the soil. His hand sank down into it and yet not a grain was disturbed. At about three inches below the visible surface he encountered something hard and perfectly flat. It was this he was standing upon.

He straightened up again and looked about him. Already the first tidal wave of panic was beginning to ebb. It was not unknown for a *gryllook* to misfire and though it had never happened in his lifetime he knew it *had* happened, and that those who had experienced it had eventually returned to recount their experiences. But then there was also Mgn Rkhs, the time-trapped, *hwomless* wanderer. What of him? Would he, Zil Bryn, also find himself back in a desert of Frg that had not yet come to be? The thought sent a chill shiver of apprehension down his spine. Nevertheless, it was a risk that had to be taken. He closed his eyes and went through the familiar ritual, and even before it was half completed he knew that it was not going to work. The panic wave surged back but he refused to let it break. He tried again. And yet again. And every time, at the identical moment, he *knew* that it was wrong. Then, just as he was on the point of resigning himself to his fate, he heard Orgypp’s voice again. *She was talking to a Drypidon!*

Zil listened, his mind locked in a sort of rigid rigor of disbelief, while a wholly insane concept flapped back and

forth like a black wing across his consciousness. *What if everywhere was the same place?* What if Astryl, Sygmn, Prelon, Chnas—yes, and even Urth!—were all one; no more than separate pages in an infinite book? Then everything—but *everything!*—*was* Chnas! Alpha was Omega! *Fll* was but *llf*! ‘*Oho,*’ he whispered, ‘oh, *oho!* If Mgn Rkhs was lost then what am I?’

George was normally one of those drivers whom alcohol makes almost unnaturally law abiding. When he was ripe for the breathalyser his speedometer needle was never allowed to creep above 30 m.p.h. in built-up areas and he gave pedestrians right-of-way at every zebra crossing. He thus succeeded in attracting rather more attention to himself than he might otherwise have done and on several such occasions had been trailed by suspicious traffic police who assumed that he was an unaccompanied learner driver out on the loose without his ‘L’ plates up.

On this particular afternoon the familiar behaviour pattern was abandoned. George drove with a reckless disregard for human safety and the Highway Code that made him wholly indistinguishable from the average motorist. He roared down University Road, swerved off into Beaufort Terrace and whisked into a vacant parking place outside Jenny’s apartment with an aplomb that was altogether untypical. He leapt out, slammed and locked the car door and was just about to skip up on to the pavement when his eye was caught by a hummingbird flicker of brilliant colours in the middle of Beaufort Gardens. The momentary distraction of his attention allowed his heel to catch against the kerb. He tripped, lurched sideways, and fell heavily. The back of his skull struck the cast-iron pedestal of a Regency street lamp and he was knocked out cold.

He came to a few seconds later convinced that someone was bent on trepanning him with a pneumatic road-drill. Blunt blades of pain stabbed upwards through his skull and

prodded into the backs of his eyeballs. 'Aieee!' he groaned between gritted teeth and levered himself up on to his elbows.

'You all right, mate?'

'Uh?' gulped George.

'Fell an' 'it yer 'ead, didn't yer?'

The shattered world reassembled itself around George. He blinked, pushed himself up till he was sitting on the pavement and very gingerly felt the base of his skull. His exploring fingers encountered a disquieting stickiness. 'Oh Christ,' he moaned and brought his fingertips round into view. They were dark green.

'Tha's paint, mate,' said the voice. 'We just done it this mornin'.'

George turned his head and found himself gazing up at a figure in stained khaki overalls who grinned down at him cheerily.

'Fought it was blood, did yer?'

George nodded and gave a lopsided grin.

The Corporation painter bent down and helped him to his feet. As he did so his face came quite close to George's. 'Coo, we got ourselves a tank full, ain't we, mate?'

'Uh?' said George.

The friendly painter winked and made a gesture expressive of raising a glass to his lips.

'I tripped,' said George and, suddenly remembering something, turned his aching head and looked across the road into the railed-off enclosure of Beaufort Gardens. 'What the hell's he think *he's* doing?' he muttered.

The painter glanced round at the gardens and then back to George again. 'What you on about, mate?' he enquired.

George was staring with a strange kind of puzzled frown out across the grass and the gravelled walk to the raised flower bed which formed the central boss of the formal garden. 'That bloke in the fancy dressing-gown waving his arms about,' he said.

The painter nodded thoughtfully. 'Ah, well,' he said, 'seein'

as I'm on double-time I reckon I'd best be gettin' along afore I 'ave the gaffer arter me. If I was you, mate, I'd watch the old elbow a bit.' And with that he strolled away leaving George standing on the kerb gazing out across the totally deserted gardens to where Zil stood, buried up to his ankles in the insubstantial soil of a planet that had no material existence, and for the third time went through the whole arcane ritual of *gryllook*.

George groped in his pocket for a handkerchief and dabbed tenderly at the lump on the back of his head. 'Bloody idiot,' he muttered. 'What the hell does he think he's playing at?' He turned and walked slowly up the pavement to the entrance of the house where Jenny lived. As he mounted the steps to the open front door he glanced round once more. The man in the flowerbed was now standing with his wrists crossed in front of his face. As George stared towards him he suddenly flung his arms wide in an attitude of crucifixion and jerked back his head so that the light fell directly upon his distant, upturned face. George was assailed with the uneasy suspicion that somewhere, at sometime, he had seen that face before. The possibility filled him with a peculiar dismay.

Orgypp *hwomed* back into Vohl Park just as the first stars were beginning to prick their way through the Chnassian twilight. She was still intoxicated with the overwhelming *hwyllth* of her experience on Astryl. It seemed to haze her round in a faint golden nimbus as she wandered dreamily out of the focus hall and drifted like a sleep-walker across the park. The duskflowers glowed and smouldered all around her, while curious gloamers wafted down, inspected this strange blossom and then ghosted disconsolately away. Orgypp noticed none of it.

At last she came to the great Sky-Mirror that lay all fringed about with crimson-leaved *droth* trees, an ever-open eye unwearily contemplating the eternal enigma of *oho*. Attended by a solitary perplexed gloamer, still lost in her dream,

Orgypp wandered out across the surface of the Mirror. When she reached the centre she stood still and gazed down into the unruffled water. Like some wan little ghost peering in at her out of another world her own face gazed up at her from among the dust of the far-off stars. Orgypp knelt down, stretched out her arms and touched fingertips with her own image. 'We *grok* with you, all-wise *oho*,' she whispered. 'Take our heart's *hwyllth* for Zil.'

The phantom Orgypp trembled as the fingered ripples ringed outwards. The gloamer fluttered off across the water and vanished in the gathering mist. From the dim Sanctuary beyond the silent trees a bell tolled two drowsy notes.

Orgypp sat back on her heels. 'Perhaps Sng Rmh knows something,' she sighed.

Jenny opened her door to find George standing on the mat looking pale and dishevelled. 'Good Lord,' she said. 'What are *you* doing here?'

'Nothing,' he replied. 'That is—I mean—is it all right?'

'Is what all right?'

'It's not inconvenient, I mean? My being here?'

'Not for me, it isn't,' she laughed. 'Come on in.'

George entered gratefully. 'You wouldn't happen to have a couple of Aspros or something, would you? I've just collected myself one hell of a crack on the head. Right outside your front door.'

'Poor old you,' she said. 'What happened?'

'I tripped. Hit my head on a lamp post.'

'Are you tight?'

'No, no. I feel a bit dizzy, that's all. But my head's killing me.'

'You certainly look a bit off. Sit down and I'll see what I can find.'

George subsided on to the divan and patted his bruise with his handkerchief. Then he scrambled up again and moved across to the window that looked out over Beaufort Gardens.

Just as he had expected the man was still standing there, only now it seemed to George that he was looking directly across towards him. 'Have you seen that nutter in the park?' he called.

Jenny came back into the room carrying a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. 'Here,' she said. 'Help yourself.'

George shook three tablets into his palm, handed her back the bottle and accepted the glass. Then he tilted back his head and swallowed them off in one go. 'You're quite sure you don't mind my being here?' he said.

'Yes,' she assured him patiently. 'Quite sure.'

'I didn't know whether you'd be in,' he explained unnecessarily. 'Then I thought well, what the hell, she can only tell me to go and get lost.'

'You *are* tight,' said Jenny.

'I've had a couple,' he admitted. 'I'm not tight though.'

She took the glass from him and put it down on the pull-out flap of the wall unit. George turned to the window again. 'What do you make of that?' he asked.

'Make of what?'

'Him,' said George, pointing out to the park.

Jenny moved round and looked out. 'Who?'

'The nutter in the silk dressing-gown. Down there.'

'Down where?'

George glanced at her. 'Come off it,' he grinned. '*Him!* In the flowerbed.'

She looked at his pointing finger and from it to the window. 'I honestly don't know what you're talking about,' she said. 'There's no one there.'

It occurred to George that perhaps she was short sighted and didn't like to admit it. 'Oh well,' he shrugged, 'so long as he's happy.'

Jenny stared at him. 'Just what *have* you been up to?'

'Nothing. Oh, I gave Wendell a lift.'

'Wendell?'

'Yes, I picked him up in the High Street and took him

along to *The Mitre*.' He glanced at her. 'He said you'd probably be going yourself.'

'Oh, he did, did he?'

George nodded. 'Are you?'

'Yes, I expect so.'

'With someone?'

'Why? Are you offering me a lift?'

'I'm offering to take you,' he responded boldly.

There was a momentary pause. Jenny's lips curled into a slow smile. She raised her right arm and brushed her fingertips very lightly against his left cheek. 'Why, *thank* you, George,' she murmured. 'I'd appreciate that *very* much.'

To Zil, Orgypp's bestowal of herself came as though her hands had been laid invisibly upon his own. He heard nothing, felt nothing, and yet was aware of her presence everywhere about him like a sudden, unexpected exhalation of *thoth* flowers which takes one unawares and makes the heart glad. And at that moment he was most sorely in need of comfort.

Having failed signally to *gryllook* himself back into Chnas he had finally summoned up sufficient courage to venture outside his *hwoming* point. Almost immediately he had found his progress blocked by some invisible obstruction which seemed to coincide almost exactly with the outer perimeter of the gravel path surrounding the flower bed.

Shuffling along sideways with hands outstretched he had edged himself cautiously along it and had eventually come upon an opening which his groping fingers told him was an arched doorway. It was at this point that some faint glimmering of his situation dawned upon him. *Physically he was still in the school focus hall!* But if that were so why had he not been able to contact Orgypp and the children? As he strove to make some sort of sense of his predicament, he was aware of the name 'Mgn Rkhs'. It was as though it had been whispered into his inner-ear. The unuttered words dropped into

his heart like two heavy stones; his knees gave way beneath him; and he subsided through the leafless twigs of a non-existent forsythia bush on to the invisible floor of the hall.

Mgn Rkhs! Zil buried his face in his hands. If he was right then it would explain why he was alone. The hall he was in must exist in a different *time* from theirs! But *how* different? An hour? A week? A hundred years? Forwards? Backwards? He groaned and then remembered that the first thing he had heard was Orgypp's voice asking the children where he was. So why had she not been able to hear *him*? 'When am I?' he shouted, and heard the echo taunting '*am I? am I?*' through the deserted hall and the corridors.

After a while he raised his head and looked about him. He found the sensation of having an immaterial bush growing straight through him was so exceptionally unpleasant that he got to his feet and edged his way clear of it. He then discovered that by closing his eyes and imagining himself to be blindfolded and back in his school he was able to make slow but steady progress until eventually he got himself outside the building and into the open courtyard. Once there he opened his eyes again. He discovered that he was now standing on the air about a foot above the surface of the roadway in the middle of Beaufort Terrace. The sensation of acute vertigo this illusory suspension produced in him was almost more unsettling than the bush had been and he shuffled and groped his way across to the kerb whose elevation happened more or less to coincide with the surface of the school courtyard on which he was really standing. There he crouched down again, cupped his chin in his hands, and waited for *oho* to remember him.

It was then that Orgypp's prayer reached him. Warm and gentle as the smallest rain down-drifting on the arid wastes of Frg it brought to him, like a faint mist, the first stirrings of hope. At once, as though a milky film had been sponged from his mind he was able to see clear beyond his predicament, to realize where he was. It was as if a blurred projection

had suddenly sharpened into focus. This *was* the Urth of his imaginings, though infinitely more detailed than he had ever perceived it. These soaring walls were the faces of the Urth town-dwellings he had invented; these wheeled and windowed boxes the *kars* his Urthlings used for transport; those trees the *shfts* which he had cunningly uprooted from the wooded valleys of Chnas, transplanted here and re-named '*helms*'. This was his Urth; his brain-child; his creation! But if that was so then must it not mean that Shorge Gringe also existed? And Margery and Shennifer and all those other Urthlings whose troubles and struggles had diverted him for so long?

With that mixture of apprehension and tingling excitement best known to the playwright who first sees the creations of his own imagination bodied forth upon a stage, Zil scrambled to his feet and gazed about him with a new wonder. A phrase of the Drypidons' came winging into his mind: 'contiguous enantiomorphic compatibles'. How he wished that he had had a chance to visit the Repository of Tongues and find out what it really meant. That was the trouble with the Drypidons, they were frequently led into making unwarranted assumptions because they tended to forget that Chnassians could not simply avail themselves of the corporate knowledge of a whole species as they could themselves. Still 'contiguous' meant 'touching', didn't it? and 'compatible' presumably meant 'able to exist along with' or something like it. That left only 'enantiomorphic', which, had Zil been familiar with the phrase he would probably have classed as 'an egregious collocation of amorphous prefixes'. Certainly he had not a clue what the word meant. Which, for his own peace of mind, was perhaps just as well.

'He's gone now,' George announced.

'Who has?'

'That weirdie in the garden.'

'Oh,' said Jenny. 'Has he?'

From where he was sitting George could see out across Beaufort Gardens but he could not see down into the street immediately below the apartment. Had he been able to do so he might have felt less sanguine. He gave a slightly self-conscious chuckle. 'The odd thing is I felt sure I'd seen him before somewhere.'

'Yes?' Jenny's interest in the subject could hardly have been more tepid. 'How's the head?'

'Much better, thanks.' George explored the lump with his fingers and winced. 'Still pretty tender though.'

'Well, what did you expect?' said Jenny. 'Here, would you like another coffee?'

'I don't mind if I do.' He leant forward and held out his mug. 'Wendell tells me you know Phil Boomer.'

'That's right.'

'You never told me.'

'No?'

'What's he like?'

'In bed do you mean?'

George made a sort of whinneying noise. 'Good lord, no!' he stuttered. 'I mean to say ... well...'

Jenny grinned slyly. 'Aren't you curious?'

Lacing it up like old boots! 'I didn't mean *that*,' he protested.

'Phil's no Penthouse superstud,' she mused. 'Take it from me.'

George made a desperate attempt to wrench the conversation back on to the rails. 'He's won a Galactic Award, hasn't he?'

'Not for that he didn't,' chuckled Jenny.

George sniggered.

'How's Margery?' she enquired.

'She's fine, thanks.'

'In bed, I mean.'

'Ah,' said George. 'Well, now that's a bit—'

'Frigid, is she?'

George found himself being pulled in two different directions. As usual he compromised. 'Marge has her moments.'

'But not enough of them. Is that it?'

'You could say that,' he admitted.

'Maybe it's not her fault?'

'Maybe.'

Again Jenny chuckled. 'Would you like me to find out?'

George choked on his coffee. 'Jesus Christ, Jenny!' he protested. 'You'll be the death of me yet!'

'But that's why you came here, isn't it?'

Was it? George wondered. Well, up to a point, obviously she was right. But not altogether. 'You remember yesterday evening,' he said slowly, 'when I was telling you about that story I'm writing?'

'Yes. What about it?'

'How, on Agenor, they *grok*?'

Jenny grinned. 'With those glove things? Yes, I really went for that.'

'But *grokking* isn't just—well, *sex*. It's sort of making peace with yourself and . . . and with *everything*.'

'So?'

George raised his eyes and gazed directly at her. 'That's why I came this afternoon,' he said. 'I had a bust-up with Marge this morning and since then—*before* then, really—I don't know—I've just felt . . . well, *trapped* somehow. It's hard to explain. But I remembered last night and—Oh hell, I suppose I'm just kidding myself as usual.'

As she listened to him stumbling on, the confidence ebbed from Jenny's smile. 'I'm afraid I'm right out of pot,' she said apologetically. 'Phil and I finished it off last night.'

'Pot?'

She nodded. 'Don't you remember?'

'Oh,' said George flatly. 'Was *that* what it was?'

'You didn't know?'

'No,' he confessed.

'Well, what did you think it was?'

'I suppose I thought it was—well, just being with *you*,' he said.

She studied him pensively. Then she got up from her chair, opened her handbag and took out a cigarette packet. It was empty. 'Blast,' she muttered. 'I suppose you haven't got one? No, I remember, you gave them up.'

'Would you like me to get you some?'

She surveyed him levelly and seemed to be debating something within herself. 'Yes, all right,' she said at last. 'Thanks very much, George. There's an off-licence just down at the corner.'

She extracted a five pound note from her bag and handed it to him. 'You might as well get something else too while you're at it.'

'Such as what?'

'A bottle of gin. I've got some tonics in the kitchen. You're sure you don't mind going?'

'Not a bit.' George took out his wallet and laid the note inside. 'Cigarettes and gin,' he said, climbing to his feet. 'Anything else?'

Jenny shook her head. 'They'll do,' she said. 'At a pinch.'

A small, illuminated notice was hanging from a nail beside the door of the Vohl Park Sanctuary. It informed prospective clients that the Counsellor was engaged. Orgypp read it, hesitated for a moment, then seized hold of the metal bell ring and tugged it with all her might. As she did so a large black and white *prr* jumped down from a nearby wall, stalked towards her, and began rubbing itself backwards and forwards against her bare legs.

In the inner sanctum that adjoined the consulatory Sylf and Ptl looked up and eyed each other apprehensively. Then they both turned their heads and looked at Sng Rmh who was making miniscule adjustments to the strings of a *ghlune*. Again the bell pealed imperiously.

'That really is *too* bad,' complained Ptl. 'Can't they read?'

'They'll go away,' said Sylf. Raising a large medicine-dropper she squeezed its bulb and carefully injected five more drops into her water-flute.

The bell jangled a third time.

'Go and see who that is, my pet,' murmured the Counsellor. 'No one could be so unmannerly unless it was a matter of real importance.'

Ptl pulled a cross face, shrugged on her robe and pattered out through the consultery and down the stone flagged hallway to the front door. She slid aside the viewing flap and peeped out. 'Oh, it's you, Orgypp!'

'Forgive me,' pleaded Orgypp. 'It's about Zil.'

'All right,' said Ptl. 'Just a moment.'

The flap slid to; a bolt scraped; the heavy door groaned open. Like a liquid shadow the *prrr* slipped through and vanished silently. 'What about Zil?' asked Ptl.

'He's disappeared.'

Ptl's eyes widened. '*Oho!*' she whispered. 'When?'

'About *lakh*-time. He didn't *hwom* from Astryl.'

Ptl closed the door and wriggled the bolt back into its socket. 'You'd better come on through, Orgypp,' she said. 'I expect you could do with a *grok*.'

Orgypp followed the acolyte through into the consultery. She stood with bowed head outside the candlelit sanctum while Ptl was explaining the reason for the untimely visit.

'Come along in, little Orgypp!' called Sng Rmh cheerily. 'Sylf, a bowl of wine for our guest. Now sit yourself down, my dear, and tell us all about it from the beginning.'

Orgypp trotted forward and sat down cross-legged on a cushion beside the old man. 'I think I'd better start with when I went to call on Llylly,' she said, and did so.

'You have these pictures?' enquired Sng Rmh.

Orgypp slipped a hand inside her robe and drew out the scroll, now somewhat the worse for its travels. She handed it to him and he unrolled it and peered closely at the drawings.

‘This is indeed curious,’ he said. ‘And you say these are of Zil’s Urth?’

‘Yes,’ said Orgypp. ‘I’m sure of it. Those are the things he called “*kars*”.’

‘Yes, yes. I recall them.’ Sng Rmh nodded. ‘And so then, naturally, you went along to the focus hall to meet him.’

Orgypp resumed her story. When she reached the point where the Drypidon had spoken to her of ‘overlap’, Sng Rmh held up his finger. ‘Can you recall the exact words they used?’

Orgypp shook her head. ‘I couldn’t understand any of it,’ she said sadly. ‘But the Drypidons were truly sympathetic.’

‘They are indeed creatures of a supreme *hwyllth*,’ Sng Rmh concurred. ‘Furthermore they possess the key to certain natural mysteries of which we on Chnas still know little or nothing.’

‘They didn’t know where Zil is,’ said Orgypp sadly. ‘Or even *if* he is.’ She looked up and frowned. ‘“Asomatic continuum”,’ she said and blinked with surprise.

‘Eh? What’s that?’

‘I’ve just remembered it,’ she said. ‘That was one of the things they said. Do you know what it means?’

‘No,’ confessed Sng Rmh. ‘But we may be able to find out. Sylf, run and get me Sml Wht’s *A Chnassian on Astryl*. And Ptl, my dear, while we’re about it we might as well have the epergne too.’

It took the old man some time before he tracked down anything at all helpful. It came from the chapter of Sml Wht’s work entitled ‘*Relations and Revelations*’ and read as follows:

‘The Astrylian Drypidons are on familiar terms with many different aspects of *oho*, some of which would almost appear to correspond with what our ancient Chnassian sages were wont to refer to as “the unattainable *Hghr Trth*”. For the greater part these concepts are concerned with the nature of that mysterious quality which the Drypidons call “essence”. As far as I have been able to follow them I would say that they appear to regard our “substance” as little more

than our immediate subjective perception of but one facet of "essence". I confess that I have been unable to find suitable Chnassian equivalents for many of their philosophic concepts and, to be frank, I believe the vast majority of them to be wholly meaningless.'

Sng Rmh snorted and tossed the book aside. 'It's obvious Wh't's hopelessly out of his depth,' he grumbled. 'We'd better see if the *rhns* have anything to offer. You might just as well put your question to them directly, Orgypp. If we get no positive response we can always try some other way.'

Orgypp nodded. 'What shall I do?' she asked.

'Just take the *rhns* in your hand, close your eyes, and ask *oho's* blessing. Then drop the *rhns* into the epergne.'

'Shall I ask them where Zil is?'

'That seems a very reasonable request,' said Sng Rmh.

Orgypp picked the five round stones out of the dish and weighed them in her outstretched palm. They felt strangely heavy and rolled sluggishly, almost as though they were imbued with some perverse will of their own. A thrill of apprehension tightened her stomach. She gave a quick little shiver, screwed up her eyes, whispered: 'Dear *oho*, where is my Zil?' and released the pebbles.

Instead of the metallic clatter she expected, she heard only a simultaneous gasp from the three observers. Orgypp opened her eyes, glanced down, and saw to her utter astonishment that the *rhns* were apparently hanging suspended in the air about a foot above the centre of the dish. She was too surprised to say anything at all.

'"*When is, is not: then is-not, is!*"' gurgled the old man. 'Great *oho*! To think that I, Sng Rmh, should have lived to see it!'

'But what does it *mean*, Counsellor?' cried Orgypp. 'Where is Zil?'

'Where indeed?' crowed Sng Rmh. 'Surely *oho* wishes us to know that Zil is *of* Chnas still, but not *in* it! But what is Chnas? What is Zil? What are we all, Orgypp, but a frag-

ment of the almighty jest of *oho*? A jest without beginning and without end which mocks our puny understanding! Your *thrunngs*, Orgypp! Sylf, Ptl, come my dears! Let us *grok* praise to the ineffable!’

It was on his way back from the off-licence that George again caught sight of the man in the oriental dressing-gown. He was standing in the roadway outside Jenny’s house peering into a car. A car? Christ Almighty, that was *his* car! What the hell did he think he ... ‘*Omigod!*’

The light was not particularly bright and the man was a good fifty yards ahead up the street when George saw him step forward, pass straight through the middle of the Mini, and emerge on the pavement.

George stood as if cemented to the spot and felt his hair rise upon his scalp. Immediately behind him a young woman was pushing a pram. ‘Excuse me,’ she said and woke George out of his trance.

He took a step to one side and let her go past, but he still kept his eyes fixed on the improbable figure who now appeared to be standing in the centre of the pavement and gazing up at the window of Jenny’s apartment. As he watched he saw the pram-pushing woman advance steadily towards the man and he saw him glance round. At that moment George’s muscles seemed to unlock themselves and he too began to move hesitantly forward up the street.

Some twenty or so yards were now separating George from the woman and perhaps the same distance, or a little more, separated her from the man. As the gap between them lessened George experienced a sensation which amounted almost to a nausea of foreboding, a feeling that something inexpressibly dreadful was about to happen and which he was utterly powerless to prevent. He recognized it as part of a recurrent nightmare from which he always awoke just before the crisis and he willed himself to wake up now. He even attempted to quicken his pace in order to precipitate

events but, as he had half expected, the pavement seemed to stretch itself out like a piece of elastic on purpose to defeat him.

The woman had almost reached the steps which led up to Jenny's house and the man's body was concealed from George's view by her back and the hood of the pram. Any second now he must step to one side as George himself had done to allow her to pass. Three yards at the most were separating them; two:—'*Omigod!*'

For the second time in two minutes George had witnessed the impossible. The woman had pushed her pram straight through the man as if he did not exist!

George closed his eyes and opened them again. A sour dew of ice-cold sweat broke out all over his body. What was it? A ghost? Some sort of optical illusion? Was that why Jenny hadn't seen it? His heart was clattering like a football rattle, and where he had hit his head his skull seemed in imminent danger of splitting apart. He found that he had instinctively edged across to the inside of the pavement so that his left shoulder was thumping against the area railings as he moved along. The woman with the pram was now manoeuvring it up the steps into a doorway two houses further along the street. Not more than ten yards were separating George from the apparition when it turned its head and looked straight at him.

Anyone who had been observing George at that moment would have seen an impression of almost imbecilic astonishment transfigure his face. His mouth dropped open, his eyes popped, and a sort of wheezing croak squeezed its way up his constricted larynx. The identical expression, but without the sound, was mirrored faithfully in the features which had evoked it. For George Cringe had found himself *confronted by George Cringe!*

George never knew for sure how long he stood in Beaufort Terrace gaping at his doppelgänger but it was long enough for him to realize who it was. As the galvanic shock of

recognition faded a little he was even able to whisper the words 'Zil Bryn'.

The exotically garbed figure clasped its hands to its chest and ducked its head in the prescribed Chnassian formal greeting bow.

'I've gone right round the bend,' said George in such a quiet, matter-of-fact tone of voice that he even took himself aback. 'I'm imagining this, aren't I?'

He saw Zil's lips move and then saw him spread his hands in a cosmic gesture of total incomprehension.

It occurred to George at that point that he was possibly still unconscious—that having laid himself out against the lamp post he had not yet come round. He looked down at the carrier bag he was still clutching and then across at his car. 'No, you're conscious all right,' he told himself, 'but you're suffering from visual hallucinations. Jesus Christ, what a carry on!'

Not the least extraordinary thing was that his early panic seemed to have completely evaporated and to have been replaced by an almost clinical curiosity. He took a few hesitant steps towards Zil but was understandably reluctant to go the whole way. 'Where's Orgypp?' he said.

Zil spread his hands again and made a vague waving gesture towards the distant flowerbed, whereupon George had an inspiration. Whipping a felt pen from his inside pocket he scrawled the name ORGYPP in rapid printed capitals across the side of the carrier bag and held it up before him. By the frown on Zil's face he guessed he could read it but could make nothing of it. 'What the hell am I doing?' wondered George. 'I really *am* round the bend. Good Lord! Who'd have believed it?'

And yet, even as he thought it, he knew he did not believe it. Perhaps it was because he knew Zil too well already. In a weird way, and despite the obvious evidence of insubstantiality, he found Zil almost more real than himself. And yet Zil did not exist! No one else could see him! But then no

one else ever *had* been able to see him. Zil was his creation and he lived on Agenor with Orgypp. With a sudden numbing conviction George realized he could never share this with anyone else. People who maintain that they can see things which other people can't see are locked up in mental homes.

He glanced up and down the street, saw that nobody was watching him, then touched his chest and pointed up the steps to Jenny's house.

Zil lifted his hands, held them palms outwards, then brought them together and gently laced his fingertips in a symbolic *grok*.

George stared at him. 'Christ Almighty!' he murmured. 'You *know*!'

Further up the street a Corporation Maintenance van started up, pulled away from the garden railings and drove towards him. As it came abreast the driver sounded his horn, leant out and made a cheerful elbow-lifting gesture. 'Ta-ra, mate!' he yelled.

George flapped his hand in reply then turned and mounted the steps. As he reached the doorway he glanced back over his shoulder. Zil was still standing there in the middle of the pavement gazing up at him wistfully over his laced fingertips. Without even thinking what he was doing George raised his arm and beckoned to him, only to see Zil spread his hands in that now familiar gesture. He beckoned again and saw Zil begin to move hesitantly towards the steps then pause and look up at him again. He nodded encouragingly. Zil took another shuffling pace forward and promptly disappeared up to his shins in the bottom step.

George gaped down at him. Zil raised his head, pointed down towards his now invisible feet and again spread his hands helplessly.

It was perhaps this total incomprehension on Zil's part that suddenly convinced George that his was no ordinary hallucination. The realization hit him like an earthquake. Whatever

assumptions he had been making up to that moment collapsed about him in rubble. He did not know why the sight of his doppelgänger standing up to its knees in a flight of stone steps should be any more unnerving than watching that same apparition pass through a car, a pram and a young woman, but thus it was. He turned, bolted into the house and scampered up to the landing as though an avenging fiend were at his heels.

Jenny had left the door on the latch against his return and he scuttled in and slammed it shut behind him.

'Hi!' called Jenny's muffled voice. 'I'm in the bathroom.'

George dumped the carrier on the divan. Keeping well back he edged his way round till he could peep out of the window. He saw that Zil had now moved back on to the pavement. 'Jenny! Can you come here a moment?'

'I'm under the shower.'

'What do you know about hallucinations?'

'About *what*?'

'Tell you in a minute,' said George. 'You don't mind if I help myself to a drink?'

'That was the general idea. Fix me one 'too, while you're about it.'

He dragged the bottle out of the carrier and hurried through into the kitchen. While he was stripping the lead foil wrapping from the stopper he heard Jenny turn off the shower. Some bottles of tonic water were standing on the dresser. He snapped the cap off the gin, reached down two tumblers from a shelf, poured out two large doubles and topped them up with tonic. He took a large gulp from one then carried the glasses back into the sitting room. He put Jenny's down beside the record player and stationed himself so that he could see out of the window. Zil was still standing there. He was looking out over the gardens.

A minute later the door to the bathroom opened and Jenny appeared. She was swathed in a blue and white striped bathrobe and was rubbing the damp ends of her hair with a

hand-towel. 'Well, here I am,' she said. 'Where's that drink?'

George handed it to her. 'Before you have it,' he said, 'would you mind taking a look out of the window?'

Jenny's eyebrows twitched interrogatively but she did as he asked. 'Well?' she said. 'What about it?'

He pointed down at Zil. 'You don't see anyone down there?'

She shook her head. 'What *is* this?'

'I don't know,' said George. 'Unless I've gone mad.'

'Was that what you—'

'Yes,' he said. 'That chap I told you I saw before in the gardens.'

'What about him?'

'That's just it. I can see him now. Only you can't.'

'You're not serious!'

'Not only that,' said George. '*I know who he is!*'

Jenny stared at him. She took a long swig at her drink.

'Exactly,' said George. 'You *can't* believe me.'

'Did you really expect me to?'

'No. But I needed to find out.'

He was looking out of the window as he said this and he saw Zil glance up at him and then shuffle hesitantly away down the street towards University Road, feeling his way along like a blind man.

Jenny scrutinized George's face curiously. 'Good Lord!' she murmured. 'I do believe you really *are* looking at something.'

He nodded. 'At Zil. He's going down towards the corner.'

'*Who?*'

'Zil,' he repeated. 'Zil Bryn.'

'And who the hell's he?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Jenny took another sip at her drink then set the tumbler down and resumed the attack on her damp hair. 'You've seen him before, have you?'

It was on the tip of George's tongue to say: 'Whenever I

look into a mirror,' but he dared not risk it. 'I told you,' he said. 'Out there in the garden.'

'But if you know his name ... ?'

George shrugged.

'Is that supposed to make sense?'

Zil had now passed out of sight but George knew he was still down there somewhere, groping his way—*Groping!* With a sudden electric leap of the imagination he had grasped the significance of Zil's inexplicable incomprehension—of that hesitant, blindman's shuffle towards the steps. He turned to Jenny with an expression of blank wonder in his blue eyes. 'Oh Christ!' he whispered. 'He's not really *here* at all!'

'Well, well,' said Jenny flatly.

'Not *here!*' George reiterated. 'Not here in *our* world!'

'Ah,' said Jenny. 'There are others, are there?'

'How the hell do *I* know?' he flared. 'How the hell does *anyone* know?'

She paused in her rubbing and regarded him speculatively. 'Look, hadn't you better tell me just what it was you thought you saw just now?'

George took a final glance down the deserted street and tried unsuccessfully to come to terms with concepts which hitherto had belonged strictly to fantasy. The effort made him dizzy. He turned away, walked slowly over to the divan and noticed the name ORGYPP scrawled on the side of the carrier. 'But if he exists only in my imagination,' he murmured, 'then surely he'd have been able to read it.'

'Read what?' asked Jenny.

'That,' said George, sitting down on the divan and holding up the carrier.

'What on earth is it?'

'A name.'

'Hey!' she cried. 'I remember! Didn't you say she was like me?'

George nodded. 'She's his partner.'

'His?' The penny dropped. 'You mean this—this character you're talking about is the one you—'

'Yes,' said George, 'it's Zil. Zil Bryn.'

'Hey, *man!*' she whistled. 'You just have to be kidding!'

George put his hand inside the carrier and drew out two packets of cigarettes. He did not say anything.

Jenny came over, took the packets from him and broke one of them open. She put a cigarette between her lips and offered the packet to George. He shook his head.

'Aren't you going to tell me?' she said.

'There doesn't seem much point, does there?'

Jenny struck a match and held it to her cigarette. 'How do I know,' she said reasonably, 'unless you do?'

'But if it *was* just an hallucination,' muttered George, 'he'd have been in here with us now, wouldn't he? Yet he couldn't get up the steps. He just went *into* them. Like wading into a swimming pool.' He glanced up and smiled. 'You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

'Why don't you stop telling me what *I* think,' she said, 'and simply go ahead and tell me what you saw? *I'll* tell you what I think, after that.'

'All right,' said George, and he told her just what he had seen from the moment when he first stepped out of his car.

She did not once interrupt him, but when he had finished she said: 'Then why didn't you see him when you went out to the off-licence?'

'I don't know,' he said. 'Maybe he was further up the street or something.'

'Didn't you look out for him?'

'No, I didn't. I wonder why?'

'What makes you so sure he *is* this character in your book?'

George spread his hands. 'Because I know Zil as well as I know myself. Better maybe. You see, he's what you'd call a self-portrait.'

'And Orgypp?'

He smiled wryly. 'A wish fulfilment?'

'Tell me some more about her?'

George did his best.

'She's out of this world, all right,' was Jenny's guarded comment.

'And Zil?'

'Oh, you believe in him all right,' she said, 'so I suppose he *must* exist—for *you*. Maybe he's a sort of day-dream or something.'

'He's more than that,' said George. 'I swear I saw him as real as you are now.'

'But you didn't touch him?'

'No,' he admitted. 'Somehow I couldn't bring myself to try. I don't know why.'

'Then you don't think it was just some weird side-effect of that bang on the head?'

'I did at first,' he said. 'Then I remembered how it was my catching sight of him in the gardens that made me trip. I mean I'm almost sure I'd seen him *before* I was knocked out.'

'Can you see him out there now?'

George got up, moved across to the window, opened it and leant out. The daylight was beginning to wane. A few pedestrians were walking in the street but Zil was not among them.

Jenny came and stood beside him. 'Well?' she asked.

'No, he's not there.'

She crooked her arm behind her neck and scooped up the heavy swathe of her long, dark hair. 'Does that feel dry to you?'

'Eh?' he murmured absently.

She twitched it against his cheek and repeated her question.

'It's still a bit damp at the ends,' he said.

She put a hand in the pocket of her bath robe and drew out a hairbrush. 'Would you mind giving it a brush at the back?' she said.

He closed the window, took the brush from her and was about to make a start when she moved across to the divan

and sat down cross-legged upon it. 'Over here,' she said.

He followed her obediently, put his empty glass on the table, sat down beside her and began drawing the brush downwards in long strokes. Almost at once it got stuck in a tangle. 'When that happens, catch hold of it in your other hand,' she said. 'Like this. Don't you ever do it for your wife?'

'No,' he confessed.

'Well, you should try it sometime. Maybe it'll turn her on.'

'You think so?'

'Well, it turns *me* on,' she said. 'Why don't you try imagining I'm Orgypp?'

'Maybe you are.'

'Yes, maybe I am,' she chuckled. 'Hey, that's great! You be Zil and I'll be Orgypp! And just keep on brushing till I tell you to stop.'

She put her hands behind her, tilted back her head and sighed luxuriously. Her bath robe parted down the front to expose her bare breasts. Seeing them, George was overcome by a fresh wave of giddiness, but he went on brushing away stoically until she murmured plaintively: 'They're not *just* for looking at you know, Zil.'

'Omigod!' groaned George.

Zil perched himself upon an invisible boulder, cupped his chin in his hands and gazed down at the traffic which was rushing silently along University Road. The slight decline of Beaufort Terrace ensured that he was now suspended some eight feet above the pavement, or, as he rightly guessed, on some prominent portion of the rockery that occupied one corner of the school courtyard in Vohl Park. It occurred to him that he was not really *seeing* this scene at all but was somehow dreaming it—seeing as one saw in a dream through eyes which were really closed. Even so he began to notice certain peculiarities of Urthling behaviour which he had not thought to include in his vision of the planet.

He was fascinated by the manner in which the inhabitants contrived to avoid touching one another as they hurried about their business. On Chnas, touching was almost tantamount to seeing, and no Chnassian would think of consciously avoiding physical contact, yet these Urthlings seemed to sheathe themselves round in a transparent cloak of inviolability which enabled them to flow round one another like water gliding over pebbles in a stream. And there were so many of them! Hundreds and hundreds, all scurrying back and forth as busy as *nps* round a *np* heap. He guessed that the entire population of Vohl, *rortls* included, would scarcely go to make up the numbers on this one thoroughfare.

Almost more puzzling was the depressing absence of any form of *hwyllth*. Only in the faces of some of the very little children could he discover anything remotely resembling it. Now and again he would see one of them look up towards him, smile delightedly, and tug at its parent's hand as if to draw attention to this strange and exotic migrant. But even if the parents did glance upwards their eyes were invariably focused inwards and they saw nothing. The infants were dragged away along the street, their heads twisted backwards as they strove to get in a final glimpse of the marvellous man-balloon who was floating mistily in the air outside the bottle-shop.

Zil had assumed all along that the written language of Urth would be the one he had chosen for it—that is to say an adapted form of the Chnassian script—but his first glimpse of the shop fronts in University Road showed him that he was mistaken. Admittedly some of the characters appeared familiar but the words they formed were pure gibberish. He would almost certainly have accepted this as just another inexplicable discrepancy had not a singular occurrence alerted him to the true nature of the situation.

An old man with the long white hair and whiskers of a Venerable Counsellor was making his way slowly along the crowded pavement on the far side of the street. He was dressed

in a brown, belted, ankle-length garment which looked as if it had seen better days, and on his head was perched an ancient and shapeless hat. In his grimy, mittened hands he held a placard on which was printed in large red and black characters the message—

PREPARE
THEM TO
MEET
THY DOOM

As the patriarch shuffled abreast of the off-licence he turned to peer into a shop window. The reflected statement on the face of the placard blared out across the street at Zil with the shattering urgency of a trumpet blast.

The effect upon him was traumatic. He leapt to his feet and bawled out at the top of his voice: '*Prepare to meet thy doom!*' His only response was a sudden raucous cawing from the startled *brll* birds roosting high up in the message loft of the invisible school.

Strangely enough the effect his momentous discovery had upon Zil was to make Urth seem, if anything, even more mysterious than it had before. Having laboriously transliterated the message on the reverse side of the old man's placard into the Chnassian 'JESUS'SAVES', he could only assume that it was an exhortation to amass more guilt. But if that were so how could it conceivably be any sort of preparation for the doom which was imminent?

He was still worrying away at the contradiction when he remembered the hieroglyphs which Shorge had inscribed upon the carrier. By closing his eyes and concentrating hard he was able to recreate the incident eidetically and watch again as the black writing stick scribbled its way from right to left across the white paper. 'Orgypp!' he breathed, and then, 'Great *oho!* But how can Shorge Gringe possibly know any-

thing about Orgypp?' Pressing his knuckles to his aching temples he groaned aloud in an agony of utter incomprehension.

Having promised Sng Rmh that she would accompany him to the Plenary Session of the Council, Orgypp had bidden Sylf and Ptl a fond farewell and made her way thoughtfully across the moonlit park towards her home. Ever since she had consulted the *rhns* to such dramatic effect, she had been haunted by the conviction that, in some inexplicable fashion, Shorge Gringe was the key to the mystery of Zil's disappearance. For Orgypp believed in the physical reality of Shorge with an absolute faith that was beyond all reason. If Zil was Shorge's father then she, Orgypp, was his mother and she wished for him all that a Chnassian mother can wish for an only son.

When she reached home she climbed up to Zil's study and sat herself down before his work desk. The last sheet of the *Pilgrimage* was still in the transcriptor and lying beside it was a scratch pad on which Zil had jotted down the note: 'Shorge to *grok* with Shennifer???' Orgypp picked up a pencil. Starting with the last one in the line she carefully crossed out the three interrogation marks one after the other. Then she nibbled the end of the pencil, doodled a pair of interlocked *thrunngs*, frowned, and wrote in her round, schoolgirl script, 'Teach Shorge *gryllook*?' This she underlined twice.

She laid down the pencil, read through what Zil had transcribed, added a full stop and pressed the section spacer. Then she gazed up at the ceiling and chewed her bottom lip.

A minute or two later she lowered her head and began tapping away at the keys. As she became ever more deeply engrossed in what she was doing, the tip of her tongue emerged from between her small white teeth and edged its way back and forth from one side of her mouth to the other, mimicking the progress of the transcriptor carriage.

* * *

'It's no use pretending, George. Your heart's not really in your work.'

'I'm sorry, Jenny. It's Zil.'

'You're Zil!'

'That's just it. I'm not, you know. Not really.'

'Well, I guess it takes two to *grok*, not one and a half.'

'Shall I brush your hair again?'

'It might be more to the point if I brushed yours! Here, let's have another drink.'

'God, I'm sorry, Jenny.'

'Forget it. Hey, it isn't that you're scared of getting me pregnant, is it?'

'No, I didn't—'

''Cos I've been on the Pill for the last five years.'

'As long as that?'

'Daddy wasn't taking any chances. He's a G.P. you know.'

'Yes. You told me.'

Jenny frowned. 'I guess adultery just isn't your scene, huh?'

'Jenny, I—'

'I mean it's obvious you haven't ever done this before.'

George shook his head.

'Why not?'

'I suppose the opportunity never presented itself.'

'You could have made your own.'

'I nearly did once as a matter of fact.'

'What happened?'

'Oddly enough it turned Marge on.'

'She found out?'

'She suspected.'

'Won't she suspect now?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'You mean she wouldn't care?'

'I honestly don't know. I suppose she would if any of the neighbours found out.'

'But not otherwise?'

'That's about it.'

'Come on. Let's have that drink.'

While he was in the kitchen George heard the recorded voice of Stephanie Duclos from the sitting room. '*My heart is yours,*' she was complaining huskily, '*You have no cause, To treat me so-o-o...*' The room rocked gently around him and became still again. He helped himself to three more aspirins. '*That day I swore, To be your whore—Well, now I know-o-o...*' Maybe it sounded better in French. Christ, his head! He sloshed tonic into the tumblers and carried them back into the other room.

Jenny was lying sprawled out on the divan smoking a cigarette and gazing up at the ceiling. He handed her a glass and subsided on to the floor beside her. Her private shadows beckoned him on a magic mystery tour. 'Jesus Christ, Cringe,' he berated himself silently, 'you must be clean out of your mind! She's gorgeous; she's warm; she's willing; she's all you've ever dreamed about! And you can't even come up to the salute!' He swallowed two vast gulps of his drink and felt the bubbles prickling like needles behind his nose. Why, oh why wasn't he eighteen again and back at Training College? All those thousands of wasted erections. All that torment of frustration. And now this! What inconceivable sin could merit such an appalling punishment? *Your grate man!!!* Oh, God, unchain me! Set me free! *Let me OUT!*

Jenny blew a long, slim feather of smoke up towards the shade of the hanging lamp. 'What did you mean when you said it was Zil?'

'Why *did* I see him, Jenny?'

'You didn't.'

'But you agreed that I—'

'I said you *believed* you'd seen him.'

'All right then, why do I *believe* I saw him?'

'I'm not a psychiatrist, George.'

'You mean I'm round the bend?'

'Did I say so?'

'You're right, though. I must be. There's no other explanation.'

'You were okay last night.'

'I'm still okay.'

'Are you asking me, or telling me?'

'I just can't seem to get him out of my mind, that's all.'

'Shall I tell you what I think, George?'

'I wish you would.'

'I don't think it's Zil at all. I think it's Margery.'

'*Margery!* Oh for Christ's sake—'

'I think you've got an old-fashioned conscience problem, George. That's what *I* think.'

Zil was waiting on the pavement outside the house when Shorge and Shennifer emerged shortly before seven o'clock. He saw Shorge clutch Shennifer by the arm and point in his direction. Shennifer turned towards him, said something to Shorge and walked down the steps. When she reached the pavement she glanced back over her shoulder and seemed to be asking Shorge where he was. Shorge again pointed towards him. Shennifer walked quickly up to him, gazed straight through him, pulled a despairing face, turned back again to Shorge and spread her arms. Shorge came slowly down the steps, took four hesitant paces towards him, then stopped, raised one hand and pressed it to the back of his head. Shennifer's lips appeared to frame some silent question. Shorge shook his head. Shennifer spread her arms wide and twirled round on her heel. Zil watched as her hands and forearms flickered through his chest like the sails of a phantom windmill. He felt nothing at all. While this was going on Shorge simply stood there in the lamplight looking sick and miserable. Shennifer walked back to him, caught hold of him by the hand and began coaxing him forward. She managed to move him another two paces and then he stuck. Nothing, it seemed, would induce him to come within *grokking* distance. Zil stared into his face and suddenly he too caught the in-

fection of Shorge's terror. It was something wholly elemental, out of all Chnas, and to ignore it was impossible. He turned and blundered blindly away across the invisible courtyard. As he stumbled on, his ears seemed to ring with the echo of his own despairing cry: *'Prepare to meet thy doom!'*

George saw Zil bolt across the roadway, pass clean through a Renault shooting brake and emerge as a brief flicker of bright colour among the trees in Beaufort Gardens. There he appeared to trip and pitch forward into a patch of dense shadow and he lost sight of him. George found himself wrenched by a sudden irrational impulse to run after him till Jenny effectively checked it by saying: 'Well, are we going or aren't we?'

'He's run away,' said George. 'Into the garden.'

'You aren't suggesting we should go looking for him, are you?'

'No,' he said.

She peered into his face. 'Are you feeling all right?'

He nodded.

'Well you don't look too good. I suppose it could be the street lighting.'

'I'm all right.' He felt in his pocket for his car keys, took them out and shook them purposefully. 'Over there,' he said.

He unlocked the driver's door, climbed in and unfastened the other door for Jenny to join him. As she settled herself into the seat he reached across, turned her face towards him and kissed her on the mouth.

She started to open her lips then changed her mind. 'Come on,' she chuckled, pushing him gently away from her, 'or we'll never get there.'

'Do we really have to?'

'Yes,' she said firmly. 'I promised Phil.'

George sighed, twisted on the ignition and started the engine.

* * *

Orgypp wound another sheet of paper into the transcriptor, straightened it up and tapped out three more words. Then she picked up the sheet she had just removed and read it through. Did *ylleggf* have one 'f' or two? she wondered. Zil was a stickler for such accuracies and she knew he had the lowest possible opinion of her spelling, but she couldn't see that it mattered so very much, providing the sense was all right. And at least she was certain she had all her dactylics in the right order. She numbered them off one by one, murmuring the *gryllook* mnemonic as she did so—'Five Blue Trlls Laid Five Yellow Eggs: *Frt, Bls, Trnu, Lyllt, Fflng, Ylleggf, Eho*'. The Sacred Seven. How many times had she chanted that in junior school? But how could anyone transpose such encapsulated *odyl* into Urth terms? Could she perhaps write Shorge so that he just *knew* it? Or could she somehow arrange for him to discover it in an ancient tome of forgotten Urthlore? She nibbled a fingernail abstractedly and gazed out of the study window to where Oeneone was pouring a cascade of silver across the twisting mists of Vohl. She tried out one or two speculative phrases in her mind and rejected them. Finally she turned back to the transcriptor and slowly picked out the following: 'Naturally Shorge *hwomed* to Chnas.' 'After all,' she reasoned. 'He would, wouldn't he?'

The wave of giddiness which had been rolling round George's skull like a *tsunami* all afternoon returned yet again just as he was walking up the steps to *The Mitre* beside Jenny. It was strong enough to make him stagger and all but lose his balance. 'Hey, what's the matter with you?' she demanded. 'You nearly had me over.'

George apologized and muttered something facetious about the force of gravity.

Jenny steered him through the revolving door into the foyer where a uniformed commissionaire sized them up at a glance and pointed to where a printed notice and an arrow

directed S.F. Conference members towards the Princess Alexandra Salon.

They skirted round a potted palm and trudged down a carpeted aisle towards a matronly woman who was sitting at a folding table beside a pair of ornate, plate glass doors.

'Have you got 50p?' asked Jenny.

'Just about,' said George.

Jenny produced her ticket from her handbag and passed it over. In return she received another ticket. 'That's for the draw,' explained the doorkeeper in a stage whisper.

'What draw?' Jenny whispered back.

'Miss Kirt, Mr. Tabard and Mr. Boomer have each donated a signed copy of one of their most recent works.'

'Big deal!' hissed Jenny.

The doorkeeper frowned, raised her finger to her lips and said 'Shush!' loudly.

George paid his 50p and also received a ticket.

Jenny peered in through the glass. 'Hey, it looks like a full house,' she observed in some surprise. 'Phil will be chuffed.'

'There are still some seats at the back,' whispered the doorkeeper.

One of the Brains Trust panelists concluded his reply to a question and Jenny and George took advantage of the patter of applause to sneak into the salon. Wendell Hammerstein immediately caught sight of them and beckoned them to the back of the hall. 'Hi, there,' he whispered as they joined him. 'You made it.'

They grinned and nodded and squeezed past him into two vacant chairs.

Phil Boomer was reading out the next question which appeared to concern the putative origin of tektites. He offered it to Peter Lampe, whereupon Jenny turned and whispered in George's ear: 'I bet you a quid Phil stuck that one in himself. He's lifted it out of his latest book.'

Sure enough, after some private banter among the members of the panel, Lampe passed the question back to Boomer who

grinned complacently, cleared his throat and delivered himself as follows: 'For those of you present who might suppose that tektites are some novel form of B.E.M. I might as well explain that they are in fact fragments of the earth's crust which became glassified by intense heat roughly seven hundred thousand years ago. Today they are to be found scattered over a vast area of the earth's surface, but chiefly in those lands lying around the shores of the Indian Ocean. To date though—and I'm not alone in regarding this as highly significant—not a single one has been brought up in cores taken from the sea bed.

'The origin of these objects is still a scientific mystery but since Lee and Yang demonstrated the theoretical possibility of anti-matter in '57 one fascinating hypothesis has suggested that a lump of this stuff might have entered the earth's atmosphere three-quarters of a million years ago. Here it met its enantiomorph and was instantly annihilated. The tektites are all that remain of that stupendous nuclear explosion, which not only reversed the earth's magnetic field but may well have brought about massive genetic mutations. In which case it wouldn't be stretching matters too far to say that the human race is a direct descendant of a visitor from outer space—something which every bona fide s.f. writer has been maintaining for years.'

There was applause mixed with some ironic cheering from the floor and a member of the audience asked why the fact that no tektites had been found in sea-bed cores was regarded as significant.

Boomer was only too happy to enlighten such ignorance. Because, he said, it suggested that the explosion which had caused them was not of meteoric origin in the ordinary sense. Had a normal meteorite disintegrated over the Indian Ocean the likelihood is that fragments would have been brought up in the cores of the marine sediments during the forty odd years since such samples were first taken. On the other hand any meteorite composed of anti-matter would have exploded

well above the earth's surface at the instant its anti-particles came into contact with those of the earth's atmosphere.

Here Peter Lampe chipped in to say that the Siberian meteorite of 1908 was another possible contender for the anti-matter stakes.

Somebody wondered whether Boomer's meteorite might not have been an alien spacecraft constructed from anti-matter.

Boomer thought this highly unlikely but not impossible. After all if anti-matter existed, why not anti-matter galaxies, and anti-material civilizations within those galaxies? He mentioned one or two recent stories which had expanded this theme and prepared to move on to the next question.

'Well, now you know, man,' murmured Wendell. 'Science is stranger than science-fiction, huh?'

George hardly heard him. Throughout Boomer's dissertation he had been feeling increasingly unhappy—almost as if he were about to slide into free-fall. By fiercely concentrating his attention on the head of the girl in the chair immediately in front of him, he had contrived to keep a grip on himself, but as the applause for Boomer pattered out, his anchor point ducked from sight and George was cast adrift. The lights of the salon swirled slowly around him, the clapping surged back and forth, now close at hand, now infinitely remote, and his mouth was suddenly awash with saliva. He felt himself to be falling—but falling *upwards*. 'Oh-h-h,' he groaned, 'o-o-ho...' and then, like Jonah's whale, the warm and womblike darkness had swallowed him up.

Margery, her mother, and the twins were watching *Saturday Night at the Palais* when a prolonged ringing of the front door bell sent a blizzard of electronic snowflakes swirling across the telly screen.

'Forgotten his key, I suppose,' sniffed Margery. 'Go on, Katie. Let him in, love.'

'Oh, Mum!' wailed Katie. 'I went last time.'

'All right. You go, Mike.'

If Mike heard the order he certainly gave no indication. The bell shrilled again.

'I'll swear that's someone at the front door, Marge,' said Gran.

Sucking anger like an acid drop Margery thrust herself out of her chair, stalked down the hall and wrenched open the door.

'Mrs. Cringe?'

With undisguised astonishment Margery eyed the unlikely figure of Wendell Hammerstein. 'Yes,' she said. 'I'm Mrs. Cringe.'

Wendell's eyelids blinked like shutters. 'We've been trying to phone you, Mrs. Cringe, but we couldn't get through. I'm afraid your husband's had an accident.'

'Accident?' repeated Margery faintly.

'They've taken him to the County Hospital.'

'Oh God,' whispered Margery. 'Is he...?' But she could not bring herself to complete the dreadful sentence.

'He's in a coma. I've got his car here. I'll take you to him.'

Margery stepped out on to the garden path.

'Hadn't you better get a coat, Mrs. Cringe?' suggested Wendell.

'Coat? Oh, yes, coat,' muttered Margery, turning back to the house. 'What happened?'

'He just keeled over and passed out,' said Wendell. 'At *The Mitre*.'

'Was he drunk?'

'No, I don't think so. He was just sitting at the Conference. Jenny says he'd had a fall and hit his head sometime this afternoon.'

'Jenny Lawlor?'

'Sure. She's gone with him in the ambulance.'

'*Ambulance!*'

'We rang for one from the *The Mitre*. There was a G.P. in the audience. He's diagnosed delayed concussion.'

Margery had succeeded in struggling into her coat. Now she ran back down the hall and called in to the sitting room: 'I'm going down to the Hennessy's, Mum. You'll see the kids get off to bed.'

'That was real cool,' said Wendell admiringly when she had rejoined him. 'Maybe *you'd* like to drive?'

'No, I couldn't,' said Margery. 'What else did the doctor say?'

'Just that George had to be buzzed to the hospital toot-sweet. When Jenny couldn't get through to you on the phone she told me to take the car and come and collect you.'

'She was with him, was she?'

Wendell gave her a shrewd glance. 'Sure. We were all three of us sitting together.'

'This afternoon, I mean?'

'Search me,' said Wendell. 'I've been at the Conference since lunch.' He opened the door of the Mini and climbed in. 'I'm not over-familiar with your neck of the woods, Mrs. Cringe,' he said. 'Can you direct me?'

'Down to the bottom and turn right,' said Margery. 'Do you know what they're going to do to him?'

'No,' said Wendell, clipping smartly up through the gears. 'I'm no doctor, but I'd guess an X-ray.'

Margery stared ahead through the rain-specked windscreen. Two huge tears gathered along her lower eyelids, brimmed over, and trickled down her pale cheeks. The damp trails they left gleamed faintly silver in the flickering greenish light of the street lamps.

Without any memory of having opened his eyes, George found himself gazing upwards at a peculiarly intricate reticulation which was both unknown to him and yet strangely familiar—a mystery to be apprehended rather than comprehended. He felt no urgent need to search for fact or reason, being content to accept what he saw with little more than a vague sense of wondering gratitude that he of all men should

have been permitted to perceive it. At the same time he was aware of an importunate host of unfamiliar sounds all about him, a series of clicks and buzzings and intermittent whirrings that bore no conceivable relation to anything he could see. But these noises he found to be merely distracting, diverting him from his contemplation of the mysterious design woven into the canopy above his head. It did not take him long to discover that by concentrating his attention upon one particularly subtle nexus he was able to ignore the irrelevant noises and to surrender himself completely to the ineluctable *hwyllth* of a Chnassian *grokking* crib.

Orgypp turned out the light in Zil's study, walked slowly along the landing to the bathroom and prepared herself for bed. Having showered herself, dried herself, and anointed her slender body with aromatic *myrtl* lotion, she let down her dark hair till it overspread her shoulders, took two dried soporific *suth* leaves from a box of carved jasper and placed them on her tongue. Just before blowing out the lamp she eyed her reflection in the wall mirror. 'Dear *oho*,' she breathed, 'please, *please* send my Zil back to me.'

The fervent little prayer had scarcely left her lips when she heard a faint noise from the landing. She opened the door and listened. The sound came again—a gentle, musical sighing which could have only one possible origin. On naked feet she pattered across the shadowed landing to the bed-chamber and very, very slowly edged open the door. 'Zil?' she whispered. 'Zil, is that you?'

The dim shape upon the crib was outlined in faint and spectral relief by the reflected moonlight. For one heart-lurching moment Orgypp thought her prayer had been answered. But even as she started forward some instinct told her that this was not Zil. And yet how could the crib be wrong? For there was no mistaking that joyful song. She tiptoed to the side of the bed and peered down at the recumbent figure in its white, knee-length smock.

'Shorge!'

George's eyes moved slowly round and contemplated the upside down face that had swum into the orbit of his awareness. For a long moment he just gazed at it blankly and then recognition dawned. *'Orgyppp!'* he exclaimed and promptly evoked from the crib a delirious cadenza of delight.

Orgyppp heard the crib's ecstatic response and she knew that Shorge had spoken her name, but it was as though the word had generated itself soundlessly in her mind like the speech of the Drypidons. She closed her eyes, raised her right hand to her breast and felt her heart shivering beneath her fingertips.

'What are you doing here, Shorge?'

'Where am I, Orgyppp?'

'You're here,' she said. *'On Chnas. Where is Zil?'*

'Isn't he here too?'

'No,' she said. *'Shorge where is he?'*

George's response was not exactly helpful. *'This isn't really happening, is it?'*

Orgyppp looked down at him and then at herself. It struck her that there was something remarkably odd about Shorge. For one thing, the only part of him that seemed to move was his eyes. For the rest he might well have been nailed to the crib. She tried to shape her perplexity into a query only to find it met with blank incomprehension. She was about to put out her hand and touch him when she had a sudden inspiration. She darted round the far side of the crib, clambered up beside him and extended her left *thrunng*.

She was just reaching out tentatively towards him when she noticed that he was not actually lying *on* the crib at all but was apparently suspended in the air about an inch above it. Her *thrunng* drew back, timid as a snail's horn. At that very instant Shorge began to slide silently away from her. A moment later she saw him vanish, feet-foremost, through the bedroom wall!

* * *

Margery and Wendell arrived at the hospital just in time to see George's unconscious body being wheeled out of the X-ray unit by two gowned orderlies. Margery ran forward but was smoothly intercepted by a female figure in a dark blue dress and a starched pagoda cap, who was hugging a clipboard to her aproned bosom. 'Mrs. Cringe?' she enquired in professionally antiseptic tones.

Margery nodded dumbly.

'I will need your signature, my dear.'

'Is he ... ?' gulped Margery, gazing after the trolley which was now disappearing down the corridor.

'We believe he has an excellent chance,' said the Sister. 'Now if you will just sign here.' She whipped a ballpoint from the bib of her apron and presented it to Margery. 'Beside the pencilled cross please, Mrs. Cringe.'

'Hadn't you better read what it says?' enquired Wendell, looming up alongside and blinking furiously.

The Sister treated him to a look of cool distaste. 'Mrs. Cringe is merely giving her permission for the operation,' she said.

'What operation?' demanded Wendell.

'To remove the blood clot from her husband's brain.'

Margery made an untranscribable choking noise and scribbled a shaky signature in the appropriate place.

'Thank you,' said the Sister, proffering a small and carefully measured smile as though it were a dangerous drug. 'Sir Sigmund Ramshorn will perform the operation as soon as your husband has been prepared. I daresay you will find it more convenient to wait downstairs in the waiting room.'

Margery nodded. 'Will it be long ... before ... ?' she whispered.

The Sister glanced up at an electric clock. 'About twenty minutes, Mrs. Cringe. I should have a cup of tea if I were you.'

Zil crawled into the centre of the circular flowerbed in

Beaufort Gardens, squatted down and rubbed his shins which still ached from their bruising contact with an invisible bench in the school courtyard of Vohl. He peered up at the low ceiling of cloud which was already tinged orange by the diffused lights of the town, and he tried to convince himself that what he was seeing was an illusion and that he was in truth gazing up at the mirrored dome of the focus hall. He failed. 'If I were blind,' he reasoned, 'Urth would have no existence for me. Does that mean that reality is dependent upon my perception of it? that ultimately *everything* is someone's illusion? Do I exist just *because* Shorge exists, or does he owe *his* existence to my perception of him?' Each successive concept was as insubstantial as the image of a drifting cloud in a sky-mirror, and yet Zil had the curious conviction that he was within a handbreadth of grasping the unknowable. It was as though he were poised upon the climax of a *gryllook*—that brief, flickering moment when one made the supreme act of faith and leapt into the hands of *oho*—the timeless instant of eternity which was forever beyond conscious apprehension. It occurred to him that if he had been able to believe in the material existence of Urth, as he believed in Chnas, then he might now be well and truly in it, instead of in this extraordinary in-between world which was neither one nor the other. Drawing his breath in painful sips he climbed slowly to his feet and prepared to make one final attempt to *gryllook* himself back into Chnas.

Number One Operating Theatre at the County Hospital was situated on the floor below the X-ray unit and some twenty yards to the east of it. Such was the prevailing contiguity of Chnas that this also placed it in the centre of Zil's and Orgypp's inner courtyard. In fact within its own continuum the operating table now occupied that precise portion of Chnas which, in the equivalent area of hyper-space, was the habitual province of the Bryns' sky-mirror.

This fortuitous congruence would in all probability have

passed unnoticed had not Orgypp finally despaired of ever getting to sleep and ventured downstairs to brew herself a bowl of *lakh* and seek solace for her troubled spirit from her neglected *ghlune*.

She emerged into the courtyard to observe Shorge floating horizontally, with his eyes closed, some three feet above the centre of the sky-mirror. He appeared to be casting neither shadow nor reflection upon the tranquil, star-sprinkled surface.

Orgypp stared at him in wide-eyed astonishment. His head was in the shadow but even so she gained the strongest impression that he was not as he had been when she had last seen him. 'Shorge?' she whispered. 'What are you doing out here?'

The white figure did not move a single muscle, but his voice was there once again inside her head. '*Hello, Orgypp,*' it said cheerfully. '*I've been hoping you'd turn up again. Where did you get to?*'

Strangely enough the concept of 'ghost' which is so familiar to us does not exist upon Chnas, perhaps because of the rooted Chnassian reluctance to draw a firm dividing line between 'reality' and 'illusion'. Orgypp felt nothing that could have been described as fear or even apprehension, but she was extremely puzzled. 'But it was *you* who went away, Shorge,' she protested reproachfully. 'Just as I was going to *grok* with you.'

As she said this she moved around the rim of the mirror until she was standing quite close to George's head. From this new viewpoint she immediately perceived that the hair had been shaved from the top of his scalp and a neat, circular hole had been trephined into his skull. As she peered down at it she saw something vaguely resembling the skin from a rice-pudding wriggle itself out of the hole and vanish. The sight filled her with dismay, chiefly because it was so remarkably lacking in *hwyllth*. 'What *are* you doing to yourself, Shorge?' she demanded.

'I don't know,' replied George. 'When I first saw you I thought I must be dead, but now I suppose it's some kind of dream. Did you know I'd met Zil?'

'Where?'

'In Beaufort Gardens.'

'Is that somewhere on Urth?'

'It's just outside Jenny's house. She couldn't see him though.'

'Is he there now?'

'I suppose he must be. Jenny and I went on to the Conference at The Mitre. Phil Boomer was yakking about tektites.'

The hole in the top of George's head was suddenly closed off with a circle of bone. A moment later a flap of shaven scalp had unrolled itself to cover the aperture and a line of neat black stitching had begun plucking its way round the edge of the wound.

Orgypp was conscious of Time turning around her like an inexorable tide. There was so much she wanted to say to Shorge, so many questions she wished to ask. But already the moonlight had crept down to his waist and she knew instinctively that when the circle of stitching was complete he would vanish from her just as he had before.

She skipped around the rim of the mirror till she was standing at his side. 'I *grok* with you, Shorge,' she whispered breathlessly and unloosing the tie-sash of her robe leant towards him and closed her eyes.

Her *thrunng* dipped into his rib-cage as though it were made of white smoke.

At the instant of aetherial contact the surface of the sky-mirror was swirled into a racing whirlpool and the strings of the forgotten *ghlune* delivered themselves of a wild and eerie sobbing not unlike the mournful cry of the *nvr-nvr* bird in the marshes of Knyff.

As the last notes died away Orgypp felt herself thrust roughly to one side as though by a giant hand. In her head thunder and lightning crashed and flickered. Staggering back

she collapsed in a swoon upon the dew-damp cushions.

A breeze rattled the twigs of the trees in Beaufort Gardens. It shook loose a scattering of water drops which pattered to the gravel path around the flower bed. Zil heard none of it. His arms were spread wide in that attitude of crucifixion which had first caught George's attention; his head was thrown back, and he was about to twist his wrists in the final dactylic. '*Fflng*', his mind counted. '*Ylleggf*.' His hands began their upward turn. . . .

'*Eho!*'

For an interminable second he seemed to hang poised above the abyss while Urth still hovered like a persistent midge in the remotest corner of his consciousness. Then, with an overwhelming upsurge of joyous relief, he knew the *gryllook* had finally worked. The key turned: one by one the wards of the lock clicked back: in rushed the desolate hissing of lonely, wind-swept waters: a sharp, wild tang of salt was upon his lips.

'*Oho*,' whispered Zil and opened his eyes. . . .

George came round from the anaesthetic at five minutes past midnight. There was none of that awful struggle back into life up a greasy pole of choking and vomiting that Margery had been expecting. In fact she was not even aware of the exact moment when he did come to, because she was looking at a copy of *Woman's Own* which she had purloined from the waiting room downstairs. Not until she glanced up from it and saw that George's eyes were open did she realize that he was back in the world of the living. 'George?' she whispered tentatively.

George's eyes moved round quite slowly and surveyed her speculatively. 'Good Lord,' he murmured. 'Where am I?'

'You're in hospital,' she said. 'You've had an emergency operation. How do you feel now?'

'Marge?' he said doubtfully.

She tried to smile at him reassuringly and then suddenly found she was crying. 'Oh, George,' she wailed. 'Oh, *Geor-or-ge!*' and laying her head down on his chest she sobbed and sobbed.

George frowned in obvious perplexity. He drew his right hand out from beneath the covers and stroked her hair abstractedly. 'Did you say "operation"?' he asked.

'You had—(gulp)—a clot—(gulp)—on the brain—(sniff).'

'Well I'm bugged,' murmured George. He lifted his hand from her head and explored the bandages which swathed his scalp. 'You're right,' he said. 'You know, Marge, I was quite sure I was dead.'

This matter-of-fact revelation brought on a fresh outburst of weeping.

'No, but I mean it,' he said. 'It was incredibly odd. You know, Marge, just for a moment I was quite sure you were Orgypp.' He looked down at her. Her face was buried in the sheet. With his fingers he drew aside her tumbled hair to expose her ears and the back of her neck. As he did this he smiled. 'Orgypp,' he murmured. 'Well, well.'

Margery drew in a shuddering breath. 'Oh, George,' she blubbered, 'I was so wor-ried.'

'Cheer up,' he urged. 'It hasn't happened, has it? Here, you're making the sheet all wet.' He coaxed her up and grinned at her. 'Just call me Lazarus,' he grinned.

She contrived a blotchy smile whereupon George, in the friendliest possible way, slipped his hand inside the neck of her dress and fondled one of her breasts. She made no perceptible effort to restrain him. 'Just making sure you're real,' he murmured.

'The nurse told me to ring the bell as soon as you came round.'

George's grin widened. 'You'd do better to lock the door.'

'George! You *can't!* You'll have a relapse or something.'

'You could be right,' he agreed. 'But, my God, do I feel randy!'

Margery shook her head bemusedly and suddenly blushed a bright pink.

'Well, well,' he chuckled. 'It must be catching.'

She leant over him, opened her mouth against his and their tongues *grokked* long and sweetly.

At last, reluctantly, she drew away, removed his hand gently from its nesting place and shook her head. 'Oh *George*,' she sighed.

He nodded, settled himself back on his pillows and looked round the room. Someone had thoughtfully placed a vase of artificial flowers on the wheeled trolley-tray at the end of the bed. They partially obscured his view of a varnished plaque on the wall so that all he could make out were the letters 'M*G*N R*KH*S'. He frowned and his eyes seemed to slide into a quite different focus. 'Orgypp,' he whispered.

'You said that before,' Margery reminded him. 'What does it mean?'

'What does that notice say?' he asked.

Margery turned her head. 'Morgan Rackhurst Ward,' she read out. 'This is one of the private BUPA ones.'

But George was groping around in the dusty cobwebs at the back of his mind's mirror. The fingertips of his memory brushed against something and drew out a fugitive pattern of woven fronds and a girl's voice singing somewhere deep down inside his head. '*I ... Mgn Rkhs ... flng ... fl ... o ...*' '*Nohwom*,' he whispered.

Margery reached out for the bell push and firmly pressed the button.

As they were making their way to the Plenary Session of the General Council Sng Rmh informed Orgypp that the unnatural *rhn* stones had recovered their senses. 'When the girls went in to tidy up the sanctum this morning they found the epergne lying upside down and the stones scattered to the four corners of the room.' He darted a quick glance at her from under his spindrift brows. 'You did say that Grll Grng

was your great-great-grandmother, didn't you, Orgypp?

Orgypp acknowledged the relationship. 'May I be allowed to know why you ask, Counsellor?'

'Old Grll appeared to me in a dream last night,' said Sng Rmh. 'It's the second time she's done it. Only this time she gave me a message.'

'A message?' repeated Orgypp. 'Did it concern Zil?'

'It was cryptic to a degree,' said the old man. 'It consisted of two words and a number which she wrote with her finger on the surface of a sky-mirror. She then beckoned me forward to read what she had written. As I approached I observed that what I had taken to be a sky-mirror was in fact a window. I was gazing down into a round room full of extraordinary machines. Your Zil was lying on a metal couch surrounded by white-robed figures whom I assumed to be priests. The vision lasted only a moment but it was remarkably vivid.'

Orgypp waited for him to continue but he had lapsed into a thoughtful silence. She prompted him gently. 'And what *was* Grll Grng's message, Counsellor?'

'Eh?' said the old man. 'Oh, the message. Yes. She said: "Our shadows", and wrote the number "10" with her finger.'

'What does that mean, Counsellor?'

'I have not the faintest idea, Orgypp.'

They walked on in silence for a minute or two, then Orgypp said: 'I saw Shorge Gringe last night.'

'You also had a dream, Orgypp?'

The truth was Orgypp did not honestly know what she had had. She described what had happened to her from the time she had left the Sanctuary till she had awoken to find herself lying alone beside the sky-mirror.

Sng Rmh frowned. 'And you say he told you he had seen Zil?'

Orgypp nodded. 'He said he had met him on Urth.'

'Extraordinary,' muttered the Counsellor. 'Quite extraordinary.'

‘Zil will come back to me, won’t he, Counsellor?’

‘Yes, yes, my dear. I’m convinced of it. In fact I’m beginning to wonder if he’s ever been away.’

‘Then where is he now?’ demanded Orgypp reasonably.

‘Where are any of us, Orgypp? Where is Chnas? Can you tell me that?’

‘Chnas is *here*, Counsellor.’

‘Because we *believe* it to be, Orgypp, does that mean that it is?’

Such metaphysical sophistry was not for Orgypp. ‘Whatever you say, Counsellor,’ she murmured.

‘No, no, Orgypp, believe me I am not teasing you. But we are all the bond slaves of our senses. *Oho* has restricted our perception to suit his own mysterious purposes. I am beginning to suspect that he may have chosen your Zil to draw aside the curtain a little further for us.’

‘And what shall we see then, Counsellor?’

‘That, my child, is something only *oho* knows,’ replied the old man with the gentlest of smiles.

Two pretty young trainee nurses came into Rackhurst Ward to tidy up. One was West Indian and the other English. George asked them their names. The West Indian child was called Peyotal and the English one Sylvia. They giggled a great deal as they pummelled his pillows into shape and straightened out his bedding. George thought they were both delightful and told them so. This made them giggle more than ever. They addressed each other as ‘Pet’ and ‘Sylv’ and told George he looked like a Sikh. The morning sun shone in through the window and on to the bottom of the bed. As it warmed his feet under the blankets George began to appreciate that life might still have a good deal to offer.

Sng Rmh had already apprised the Council both of Zil’s mysterious disappearance and the phenomenal behaviour of the *rhns*. When he arrived with Orgypp he found the Cham-

ber was so crowded that additional seats had had to be brought in from adjoining rooms to accommodate the unprecedented numbers. He led Orgypp forward and introduced her to Drg Myff the Speaker. Orgypp stood with eyes demurely downcast until Sng Rmh had concluded his introduction then she made a profound obeisance before the Speaker's throne.

Drg Myff smiled down at her. 'The Council welcomes the descendant of Grll Grng,' he said.

At the mention of the name there was an excited murmuring among the assembly. Drg Myff stilled it with an upraised hand and signalled for two more chairs to be brought and placed on the right hand side of the forum immediately below him. He waited until Sng Rmh and Orgypp were seated then opened the proceedings with a brief résumé of the events which had led him to convene the Plenary Session. That done he offered the floor to Sng Rmh.

The old man rose, bowed to the Speaker and to his peers, and gave a dry, factual account of what had transpired since his previous appearance in the Council Chamber. When he reached the point at which the *rhn* stones had behaved in such an unprecedented fashion there were murmurs of disbelief from the back of the hall. Sng Rmh ignored them stoically, no doubt drawing succour from the familiar Chnasian reflection that a prophet is not without honour except in his own district. 'I have no doubt at all in my own mind,' he said, 'that I have been privileged to witness the revelation of which Jhn Nwt speaks in his *Divination* and to which he has given the mysterious title, *Appropos of Mgn Rkhs*. Had you been present you too, my friends, would now know what was meant by "*When is, is not: then is-not, is.*" The only question which troubles me is why *I* should have been singled out in this fashion.'

'*Hja hja!*' interjected an irreverent voice but was silenced by a frown from the Speaker.

Sng Rmh brushed aside the interruption. 'Which brings me to the subject of Grll Grng,' he said.

There was an immediate hush among the audience. Sng Rmh, perceiving it, smiled thoughtfully and nodded his head. 'It would appear that I was not the only one, eh? May I enquire how many of us were similarly visited last night?'

Eleven Counsellors raised their hands. Among them Sng Rmh recognized the one who had seen fit to barrack him. 'And may we be allowed to know what message you were given, Eno Pll?' he enquired.

'The number eight,' replied Eno Pll.

'No words then?'

'Yes,' admitted the Counsellor. 'One.'

'May we learn what it was?'

'"Lie",' muttered Eno Pll.

'The word was "lie", Counsellor?'

'I've said so, haven't I?'

'Forgive me,' growled Sng Rmh. 'I thought perhaps you had seen fit to impugn my veracity.'

He was warmed by a gust of sympathetic laughter from the crowded hall. 'So,' he said, 'then let us discover what it is that Grll Grng wishes us to know. Who was given the number one?'

'I was,' piped a venerable old lady. 'And my words were "All time." I remember them distinctly.'

'"All time",' repeated Sng Rmh. 'Excellent. And number two?'

'One word only, Counsellor Rmh,' said another aged man. '"Is".'

Sng Rmh went from one to another collecting a fragment from each. By the time he had reached the twelfth and last he realized that he had assembled a remarkable contemplation *hwl*.

*All time
Is
Now
We do
Exist
But in a dream,
Whose dreamers
Lie
Athwart ourselves.
Our shadows
They,
We theirs.*

As he recited it through the words began to sing in his ears like the sea and he found his finger plucking at the strings of a phantom *ghlune*. 'Ah, what *hwyllth* old Grll has brought us, Orgypp,' he whispered. 'Can you not hear it?'

Orgypp nodded, and for a moment seemed to be back upon Astryl watching the stars dance above a molten sea. Oh, if only Zil were here. . . .

A *rortl* trotted round the back of the Chamber and handed a message to the Speaker. Drg Myff glanced at it, asked the *rortl* a question, then raised his hand for silence. 'I have just been handed a message from the Drypidon embassy,' he announced. 'It informs me that the author of *Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage* has *hwomed* on to Astryl.'

Jenny looked in on George early in the afternoon. She found him sitting up in bed reading the Sunday papers. 'Guess what?' she said, handing him a plastic carrier. 'You won the raffle.'

'Raffle?' echoed George. 'What raffle?'

'You remember. At the Con. Four signed first editions. Phil says they're sure to be worth a fortune one day.'

'Well I'm damned,' said George, lifting the books out of the carrier and examining the signatures. 'And you say I bought a ticket?'

'Everyone did. I fished yours out of your jacket pocket when I was looking for the car keys. Actually it was Samantha who spotted it.'

'It was you who brought me here, wasn't it, Jenny.'

'Well, the ambulance did the actual bringing.'

'And Wendell went for Margery?'

'That's right.'

George shook his head but said nothing.

'I think your Margery's nice,' said Jenny. 'Much younger than I'd expected.'

'You talked to her, did you?'

'Well, of course I did.'

'Did you say anything about Zil?'

'Zil? Oh, *Zil*. Well, I did tell her you'd been behaving a bit oddly during the afternoon. Come to think of it, that rates as a classic understatement, doesn't it? I mean to say. . . . Well, *you* know. . . .'

'It happened, Jenny.'

'Well, of course it happened. That's why you're here now, isn't it?'

'My seeing Zil wasn't anything to do with my being knocked out.'

Jenny gave him a cool, quizzical look. 'Um,' she said.

'You see, I saw Orgypp too.'

'Orgypp?'

George nodded. 'She asked me where Zil was.'

'She *spoke* to you?'

'In a way she did,' said George.

'When was this?'

'Before I came round last night.'

'*Before you came round!*'

'I know what you're thinking,' he said, 'but I can't help that. It *happened*, Jenny. I swear it did.'

Jenny dug a packet of cigarettes out of her handbag and took her time over lighting one. 'Well, go on,' she said. 'Tell me what happened. What else did she say?'

'She said: "I *grok* with you, Shorge."'

Jenny contrived to suppress a smile by pretending to remove a shred of tobacco from her lower lip. 'Oh, *man!*' she murmured. 'And did she?'

George nodded.

'Was it...?' Jenny entwined her fingers then unfolded them into a symbolic blossom, raising them slowly as she did so. As a gesture it was both surprisingly beautiful and remarkably erotic. It was also, by a strange coincidence, the third dactylic of the Chnassian *gryllook* ritual.

George frowned. 'I don't know *what* it was,' he said slowly. 'But I know what she wanted me to know.'

'And what was that?' prompted Jenny curiously.

'That I've got to stop writing about Agenor.'

'*Agenor?*'

'My story about Zil and her.'

'Yes, of course. Did she say why?'

'She didn't *say* it,' said George patiently. 'She *grokked* it.'

'Ah.'

'There's a difference,' he said. 'A world of difference.'

Seated on a hydro-couch within the Astrylian aquadome Zil was conversing with one of the Drypidons, which is to say that he was in effective communication with them all. A stiffish breeze was draping a fragile lattice of wave-foam across the outside of the transparent shell. The rising sun scooped handfuls of twinkling spectra from the bubbles and transformed the inside of the dome into a treasurehouse of visual *hwyllth*.

Zil had been describing at some length the events which had transpired since he had left Astryl. He realized that the Drypidons would already have availed themselves of this information but he found that recounting it helped him to orientate his own thoughts on the nature of his situation. 'Not the least extraordinary thing,' he concluded, 'is that I feel

quite sure that it was Orgypp who was responsible for the success of that final *gryllook*.'

As he spoke her name he was conscious of an all-pervasive ripple of delight among his invisible hosts. 'O rare Orgypp!' they sighed.

'Is there any explanation?' Zil enquired deferentially.

There was a moment of contemplative silence. 'There are those,' said the Drypidon, 'whose peculiar *hwyllth* it is to respond to the underlying harmony of creation with an intensity denied to others. We think it likely that, by reason of her responsive faculty, Orgypp was able—perhaps subconsciously—to appreciate both your own predicament and that of your enantiomorphic compatible. She was thus able temporarily to sever your unique dependence upon one another. Whether she was aware of what she was doing is something only she could tell you, but we think it probable that, in the Chnassian sense, she was not. But, if you will forgive us for saying so, perception such as Orgypp possesses is of a type different in kind from your own. We Drypidons recognize it as the ultimate harmonic sympathy and revere it above all others. You are indeed fortunate to possess her, Zil Bryn.'

'Then why did I *hwom* here and not to Chnas?'

'That question too is one to which we have been devoting a good deal of reflection,' said the Drypidon, 'and so far we have arrived at no satisfactory answer. We believe, however, that your presence on Astryl may well prove to be in the nature of a temporal rather than a spatial aberration. Though since we know that time and space are essentially one and indivisible, this is to say nothing more than that you are here on Astryl because you will soon need to be here.'

'Oh,' said Zil. 'For how long?'

'That will presumably depend upon the transcendental contiguity of your enantiomorph.'

'Shorge? You mean *he's* sent me here?'

'Not yet,' said the Drypidon evasively.

'But can't I *gryllook* back to Chnas?'

'For the time being neither to Chnas nor to Urth,' replied the Drypidon. 'We have however notified your Council of your present whereabouts and have just received the news that Orgypp and the venerable Sng Rmh will shortly be on their way to join you. May we say that we view the prospect with the profoundest pleasure.'

'And so do I,' said Zil.

Margery came into Morgan Rackhurst ward carrying a bunch of tawny chrysanthemums in one hand and an attaché case in the other. 'Hello, love,' she greeted him. 'Sorry I'm late. How do you feel?'

'I feel great,' said George. 'Just great.'

She bent down and kissed him. 'I see you've managed to shave then.'

'Sylvie—one of the nurses—borrowed a razor for me.'

'Sylvie? You haven't been wasting time, have you?' But there was none of the old abrasive edge to Margery's voice. 'Here,' she said, unclipping the catches on the case. 'Pyjamas, slippers, dressing gown, razor, washing things—'

'You didn't forget the notebooks, did you?'

'No,' she said. 'They're at the bottom. I could only find two.'

'That's right,' he said. 'And a biro?'

'It's in here somewhere. Where shall I put these? In the locker?'

She distributed his possessions neatly among the shelves. 'Jenny Lawlor rang. She said she was hoping to pop in.'

'Yes, she's been. She brought me those books.'

'You haven't been bored then?'

'Far from it. The great man himself dropped by this morning.'

'I know. I've just had a word with Sister. She says you were fantastically lucky to get him. He's one of the best brain surgeons in the country.'

George grinned. 'Well, he was working on one of the best brains.'

Margery fastened up the empty case then unwrapped the chrysanthemums and began arranging them in the vase which had previously held the artificial flowers. George watched her and tried to deduce what it was about her that was different. In the end he decided it was the way she was holding herself. 'You look terrific,' he said. 'What's happened?'

She glanced round at him and smiled. 'Just glad to have you back.' She returned to the flowers. 'There. How's that?'

'Great,' he said. 'Now go and lock that door.'

'Oh, George, I *can't*. They're bringing round the tea. I can hear them.'

'Would you if they weren't?'

'I'm not sure,' she admitted. 'Maybe.'

'After all,' he said, 'I might not *really* be alive at all. You can't be *sure*, can you?'

'What makes you think that?' she said, and laughed.

The Astrylian sun was standing at its zenith above the aquadome when Orgypp and Sng Rmh materialized upon the *hwoming* platform and each drew in their first deep breath of the tingling air. 'Superb!' exclaimed the old man flexing his nostrils and sniffing the ozone. 'I really should get about more than I do. I'd quite forgotten how stimulating *gryllook* can be.'

Zil bounded out from the interior of the dome and scrambled up the spiralled incline towards them. 'Orgypp!' he shouted. 'Orgypp!'

She flew into his arms like a gloamer into a flame. Their incandescent ecstasy launched a thousand Drypidons like silver rockets into the sparkling air. 'Oh, Zil,' she breathed rapturously. 'Oh, *Zil*!'

Sng Rmh beamed upon them and hummed a reunion *hwl*

into his fluttering whiskers. 'Charming! Charming!' he chuckled. 'A veritable fountain of *hwyllth*! Welcome, Zil Bryn! Welcome!'

'Forgive me, Counsellor,' apologized Zil, gently detaching his *thrunng* from Orgypp's and proffering it to the old man. 'I do forget myself.'

The three Chnassians *grokked* each other joy and peace while the Drypidons swirled a gay, impromptu life-dance high above their heads.

'Refreshment has been prepared for us below,' murmured Zil, and then, unable to restrain himself, he cried: 'I've got the most *extraordinary* things to tell you! I've been in two worlds at once! I was here on Chnas all the time! And yet I was on Urth too!'

'Gently, Zil, gently,' smiled Sng Rmh. 'Let us first pay our due respects to our kind hosts and then you shall indeed tell us all. Come now, conduct us below.'

Within the dome they found a repast had been set out for them on the central hub from which five jetties projected outwards like the spokes of a wheel. The spaces between these spokes were bottomless tanks in each one of which a senior Drypidon was floating. The three Chnassians *grokked* formally with each in turn before sitting down on the circular hydro-couch which rimmed the pentagonal table. Sng Rmh delivered a graceful little speech on behalf of the Chnassian Council and then, after giving thanks to *oho*, they settled down to their meal during which, for the second time that day, Zil recounted his adventures.

When he had concluded, Orgypp filled in her part of the story and then Sng Rmh added his. During this lengthy recital the Drypidons said not a word. Finally Orgypp turned to the one nearest to her and said to it: 'Can these things really be?' 'Assuredly, Orgypp,' it replied.

'And so our Shorge really *is*?'

'To himself he is as real as you are to yourselves.'

'Then where is Urth?' she demanded.

'We think that, at this moment, it may well be Chnas,' said the Drypidon.

'Be Chnas? But that's impossible!'

The Drypidons chuckled.

'I mean if Urth *was* there—*was* Chnas—well, we'd *see* it, wouldn't we?'

'Not necessarily, Orgypp,' replied the Drypidon. 'In the light of Zil's recent experiences we are coming round to the view that there may well exist an infinite number of asomatic continua—call them "other worlds", if you wish—which can occupy any identical area of hyperspace. Now just as it is possible for you to touch Zil by stretching out your hand or your *thrunng* and doing so directly, so it is also equally possible for you to move all the way round the table to do it. *Gryllook* is, in some ways, analogous to direct touch, but, very occasionally and in certain circumstances which we do not yet fully understand, it also permits the traveller to penetrate the transcendental barriers which separate the various continua. What was intended as a horizontal displacement becomes a vertical one. Unfortunately, as we Drypidons discovered to our cost, *hwoming* between continua is by no means guaranteed. It was our experiences in this field that led us to abandon wholesale *gryllook* many aeons ago.'

'Then what would have happened if I really *had* got through to Urth?' asked Zil.

'We do not know,' replied the Drypidon, 'but there appear to be three main alternatives. The first is that Chnas and Urth would have mutually annihilated one another. The second is that only yourself and your hapless enantiomorph would have done so. The third supposes that you and he would simply have changed places with each other. Since none of these things have happened we have no means of knowing which, if any, is correct.'

Orgypp frowned. 'But if Zil wasn't on Urth and wasn't on Chnas then where *was* he?'

‘Why is it that you Chnassians *will* persist in perceiving one another as self-determining physical entities?’ sighed the Drypidon. ‘We Drypidons have long since recognized that all physical structures are but energy field patterns held in a state of temporal stasis—patterns which we are now coming to believe may be mirrored infinitely throughout all the co-existing continua. But then we also recognize twelve quite distinct energy states, whereas you Chnassians will allow only six. That being so, within a Chnassian frame of reference, Orgypp, the only answer to your question must be that Zil was both in two times at the same place and in two places at the same time—during which his personal energy field underwent a temporary subjective displacement due to psychic circumstances which we must hopefully regard as highly exceptional. As a matter of fact, your own description of your encounter with Zil’s enantiomorph would appear to lend some further substance to the third of our hypotheses. We are now inclining to the belief that your attempt to *grok* with him may well have tipped the balance and been the direct cause of Zil’s reappearance here on Astryl. Perhaps fortunately for all three of you—to say nothing of Chnas itself—the force field displacement seems to have been minimal.’

Orgypp reached out and gently caressed Zil’s *thrunng*. Sng Rmh coughed discreetly. ‘I have been wondering,’ he said, ‘whether you are able to throw any light upon Grll Grng’s recent visitation?’

‘Ah, yes, the *hwl*,’ murmured the Drypidon. ‘A truly remarkable example of symbolized essence. As to the apparition which accompanied it, that we must regard as subjective evidence pointing to postliminious recrudescence of an hegemonical personality. This is something of which we on Astryl naturally have no experience whatsoever, but in the light of what you have told us we might hazard a guess that it was in some way connected with the sudden appearance of the new fungus in Knyff.’

'Indeed!' exclaimed Sng Rmh. 'Now that really is *most* interesting. Would you consider that Zil Bryn's experiences could have any bearing upon the matter? My Council would be most grateful to learn your opinion.'

'Certain reports on the outbreak have reached us via our embassy,' said the Drypidon. 'The curious parallel between the side-effects of the Knyffian fungus and Zil's own experiences are certainly worthy of further detailed study. However, as we are sure you will appreciate, Sng Rmh, our first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon of transcendental overlap is severely limited. But if our assessment proves correct and the two events are shown to be something more than simply coincidental, then the probability is that the matter will sort itself out very shortly. Providing, of course, that Zil Bryn remains here on Astryl.'

'On Astryl!' exclaimed Orgypp in dismay. 'Why on Astryl?'

Zil explained what the Drypidons had told him earlier.

'But for how long?' she cried.

'We would suggest at least a Chnassian year, Orgypp,' said the Drypidon. 'Naturally we hope that you yourself will accompany him.'

'But his work . . . ?'

'We thought that your Council would probably be prepared to grant him leave of absence,' said the Drypidon. 'He would then be free to complete his book and also to act as Chnassian Consul in Residence. You, in the meantime, Orgypp, would enrich us all from your own superabundance of *hwyllth*. In return, we would, if you so desired, be happy to instruct you in the elements of subliminal communication.'

'Why this is supreme generosity!' exclaimed Sng Rmh. 'Let me say at once, on my Council's behalf, that we shall be only too happy to release Zil from his pedagogical duties. As you know, *Shorge Gringe's Pilgrimage* is already being acclaimed as a comic masterpiece.'

Orgypp looked at Zil and nibbled her lip doubtfully. 'But where would we live?' she asked.

'We have arranged for a wing of the Chnassian hostel on the mainland to be placed at your disposal,' murmured the Drypidon. 'It has a most pleasant panoramic outlook over the Gargantuan Falls.'

Whether by Drypidon design or fortuitous accident Orgypp never knew, but she suddenly found herself transported back to the eternal ecstasy of the moment when she had stood upon the aquadome and watched the sunset dance of the Drypidons. She knew then, without a shadow of a doubt, that they really *did* want her to stay and that she too had something to offer them.

She smiled and bowed her head in submission. 'I am most truly and deeply honoured,' she said.

George opened the second of his two notebooks and read through that still uncompleted paragraph. '*The flatlands of Knyff had in their time spawned many strange growths but none stranger than the sulphur fungus of Cryth. For as far as the eye could see, thousands upon thousands of bright little yellow globes were thrusting up through the spongy soil like...*' He raised his head and gazed across at the window. He knew that he had only to close his eyes and he would see it all—the curtain of purple dusk drawing across Knyff; the bristling reedbeds stretching themselves out before the blood red sun; the strange, impossible, yet familiar world which he had created to feed the hunger of his imagination. He shook his head, sighed, and swiftly added the two words necessary to conclude the sentence—'*jaundiced eggs*'.

He was about to draw a line right across the page and write *THE END* in capitals beneath it when he changed his mind and appended one final sentence: '*By the next morning they had all vanished as mysteriously as they had appeared.*'

He read the whole paragraph through aloud and felt a sudden aching sadness more intense than any he had known

since he was a small child. '*I grok with you, George.*' 'Well, it's done now,' he sighed. 'That must prove something.'

He closed up the notebook, clipped the ball-point to its cover and pushed it back into his locker. Then he settled himself back against the pillows, laced his fingers and stared out at the low, scurrying clouds. Well, Agenor was gone. Farewell it. He recalled a fragment of some poetry that once, long ago, he had been made to learn by heart. Something, something, '*the cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces...*' Wasn't it Shakespeare? That one about the magic island?

Funny, he didn't remember old Wilkins ever calling that 'escapism'. So was Zil just a sort of ghost of Hamlet's father? If he was then that would make *him* a sort of Hamlet, wouldn't it? And what was Hamlet himself if he wasn't a figment of Bill Shakespeare's imagination? So what did that make Zil and Orgypp? Figments of a figment?

Drifting idly down this meandering thought-stream he was suddenly aware of the name 'Astrol'. It was almost as though a tiny crystal bell had been struck just beside his ear. 'Astrol?' he murmured in surprise. 'What's Astrol?' But even as he said it, he knew! It was there—a swift, blinding flash across the inward eye—exactly as Agenor had first been. Waiting for him!

'Astrol,' he repeated. 'Yes, of course!' But wait. Hold it. What if it turned out like Agenor? What if...? All right then. Easy. Cut out the people. Cut out the people and you cut out the risks. Well, what then? Animals of some kind? But *what* kind? Monkeys? Too like people. It would have to be something entirely different. Well, how about fish? Fish? *Flying* fish! His imagination began to bubble riotously. Hey, why not *dolphins*! He gurgled like a tickled baby. Yes, goddammit why not a race of incredibly intelligent *Flying* dolphins, inhabiting a world of blue and ever-rolling waters? No possible risk there. And the central character could be a sort of instructor of young dolphins—in elementary dolphinics, naturally. And maybe there could be an island too,

like Prospero's. Just one. A small one for the odd visitors who might drop in from other planets....

Chuckling happily he reached out for his notebook and his pen.

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